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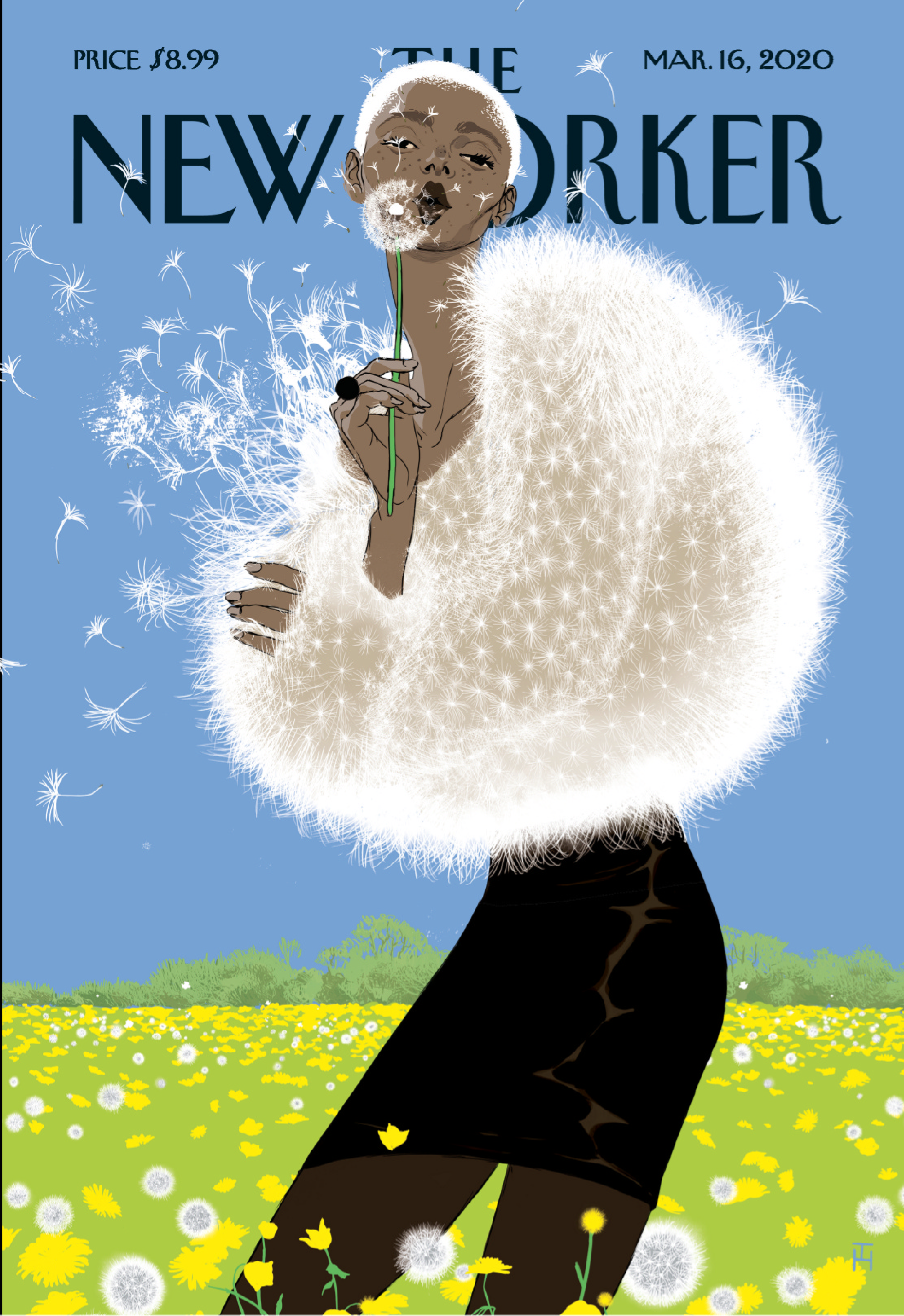

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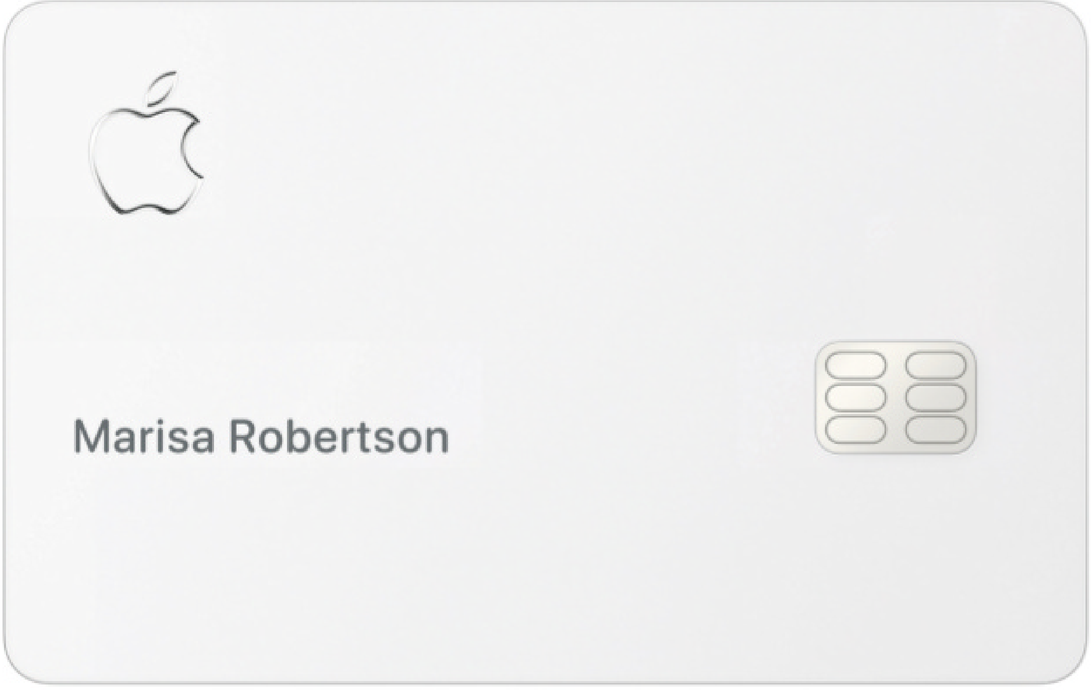

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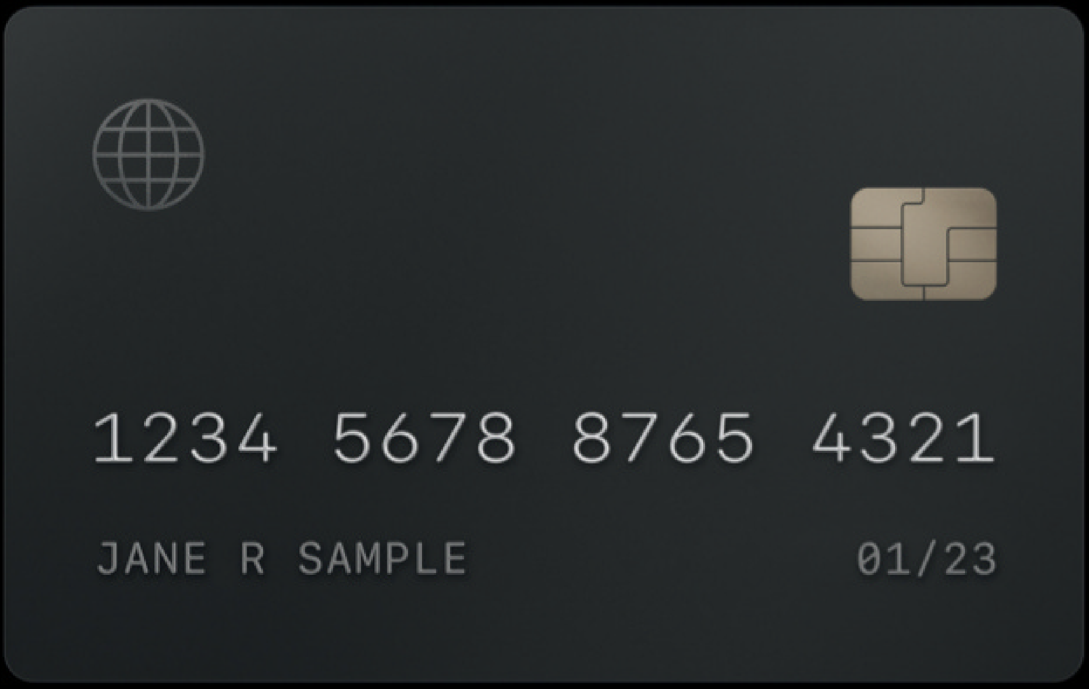
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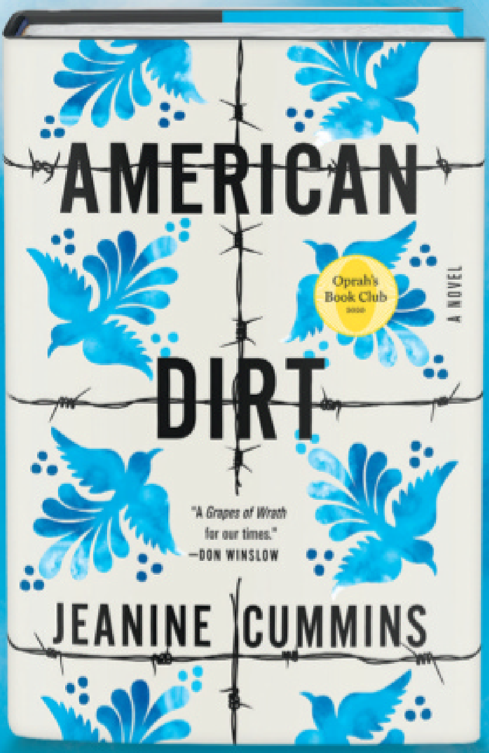

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**Dana Goodyear** (*"Hot and Toxic," p. 52*) is a staff writer based in California.

**Peter Hessler** (*"Broken Bonds," p. 34*), a staff writer, most recently published "The Buried: An Archaeology of the Egyptian Revolution."

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**Matthew Klam** (*Fiction, p. 72*) is the author of "Sam the Cat and Other Stories" and, most recently, "Who Is Rich?" He teaches at Stony Brook University.

## THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM

### DISPATCH

Dan Kaufman on the push to remove Alaska's governor, who gutted public services in the name of populism.

### UNDER REVIEW

Jia Tolentino considers Cathy Park Hong's collection of essays about Asian-American identity.

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LEFT: BRIAN ADAMS FOR THE NEW YORKER; RIGHT: KA YOUNG LEE

# THE MAIL

## EXPERIMENTAL METHODS

Hannah Fry asks whether tech companies' large-scale social experiments, such as measuring the emotional impact that negative posts have on Facebook users, are sufficiently regulated (Books, March 2nd). She is right to point out that such tests are not subject to federal regulations protecting human subjects in biomedical research. But she doesn't mention that the experiments fall outside the federal definition of "research." The protections for human subjects set out by the Department of Health and Human Services apply only to studies that are "designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge"—i.e., undertaken with the intent of public dissemination. Because market research is not meant to be seen by the public, the rules protecting human subjects are not generally applicable—and there are no equivalent federal protections for consumers whose behavior is studied by private organizations seeking monetary gain. Most of the corporate practices that Fry cites are questionable not due to a lack of consumer consent but because they may run afoul of other protections that our regulatory system is supposed to provide: truth in advertising, safety of roads and consumer products, and access to competitive markets.

*Jennifer Steele*
*Associate Professor, School of Education*
*American University*
*Washington, D.C.*

## FARM FRESH

Sam Knight's profile of Jake Fiennes, the conservation manager of the Holkham Estate, in England, showcases an approach to environmentally responsible farming ("Betting the Farm," February 17th & 24th). Readers may wonder whether the nature-friendly ethos Fiennes espouses, as well as the inspiring results he is getting, can be applied to more modest plots. By following a set of principles universally recognized for optimizing soil health, home gardeners can increase the biodiversity and ecological function of their yards, just as Fiennes has at Holkham. These include keeping the ground covered, minimizing any disturbance of the soil, and avoiding pesticides, chemical fertilizers, and herbicides. Pioneering work by Fiennes, as well as by Charlie Burrell and Isabella Tree, reminds us that nature can recover quickly under favorable conditions. Building up healthy soils can help farmers and gardeners sequester atmospheric carbon safely underground while creating a hospitable habitat for pollinators like bees, birds, and butterflies.

*Diana Donlon*
*Executive Director, Soil Centric*
*San Anselmo, Calif.*

## SIMULATING SLAVERY

Julian Lucas explores whether slavery reënactments are powerful teaching tools or serve more to trivialize history and, perhaps, to traumatize students ("The Fugitive Cure," February 17th & 24th). About twenty years ago, I taught a course at Marymount College, in Tarrytown, New York, in which my students, a diverse group of young women, read sections of Harriet Jacobs's "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl." I brought into the classroom large pieces of cardboard that I had cut to create an enclosure the size of the attic crawl space in which Jacobs hid for seven years. Lucas describes spending several minutes in a crawl space created for the same purpose by a reënactor. In my class, only two or three students were willing to enter the enclosure, even for a minute. I am still puzzling over an explanation for their reluctance.

*Jordy Bell*
*Croton-on-Hudson, N.Y.*

•

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**BASEL**
Basel, Switzerland, the last stop on your majestic voyage, is famed for its thriving art scene, complete with 40 museums and annual Art Basel, the most prestigious international art fair. For modern art enthusiasts, Fondation Beyeler, one of the finest modern and contemporary art museums in the world, is a must-see. The museum has housed has a number of famous works such as Jeff Koons' Split Rocker, illustrated here.

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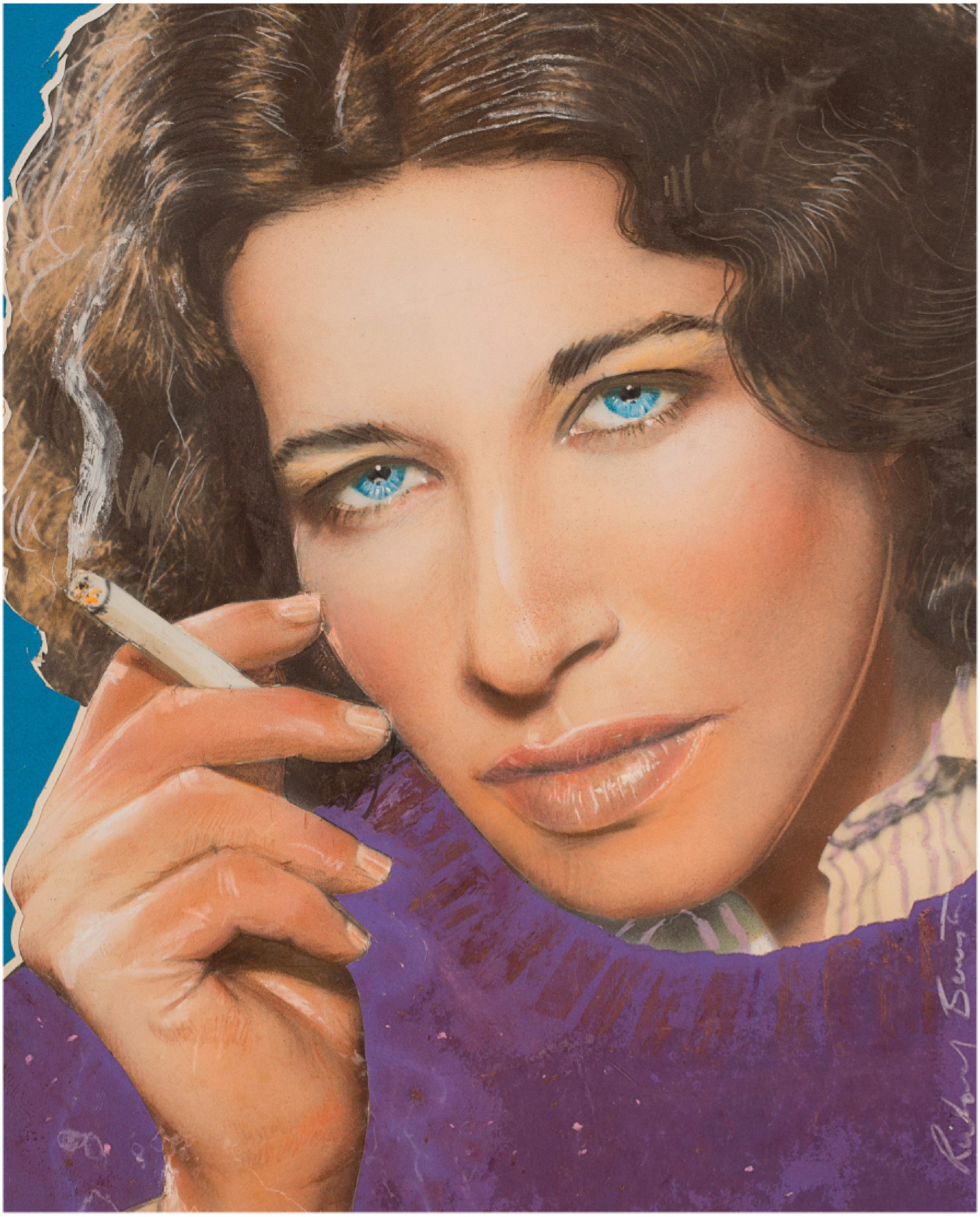
# GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



Studio 54 looms so large in the cultural imagination that it's hard to believe it was open only from 1977 to 1980. What made the night club so unforgettable? As Fran Lebowitz (above, in a portrait by Richard Bernstein for the September, 1981, issue of *Interview*) once recalled, "It was very sexy—it was still before AIDS—and there were a lot of cute people there, and it was filled with sexual intent, which I think is very important to a successful night." Starting on March 13, the Brooklyn Museum revisits the legend in **"Studio 54: Night Magic."**

## EXPERIMENTAL R. & B.

Avant-garde violin and experimental R. & B. find a shared language in the music of **Sudan Archives.** Her first EPs, an eponymous collection from 2017 and its follow-up, "Sink," from 2018, served as formal introductions to her singular style, astutely weaving Sudanese and Ghanaian instrumental influences into an electronic tapestry. "Athena," the singer's début full-length, waters the seeds of those previous releases and grows them into the most fully realized songs of her career; each one finds a new way to showcase the gorgeous contours of her voice, the expanse of her productions, and the shape-shifting qualities of her violin. Sudan Archives—who performs at Bowery Ballroom on March 12—is carving a path all her own, one bow and string at a time.—*Briana Younger*

## NIGHT LIFE

*Musicians and night-club proprietors lead complicated lives; it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.*

### Peter Bernstein
Village Vanguard

Although Peter Bernstein cut his teeth, in the early nineties, alongside such audacious players as Brad Mehldau, you won't find the guitarist messing with tone-altering effects or covering Radiohead tunes. Bernstein treads well-worn paths but still keeps danger levels high; his fluidity and pinpoint sensitivity to his cohorts allow special things to happen on a bandstand as a matter of course. His associates here include the celebrated pianist Sullivan Fortner.—*Steve Futterman (March 10-15.)*

### Christian Scott aTunde Adjuah
Blue Note

The trumpeter Christian Scott aTunde Adjuah is fine with you calling his music jazz, as long as it's a description and not a definition. Open-eared improvisation, groove, and texture—grabbing influences from his home town of New Orleans, or from West Africa, or from whatever's coursing through the airwaves today—are all part of the plan; rigid expectations, however, are not.—*S.F. (March 10-15.)*

### Leif
Public Records

The Welsh-born London electronic musician Leif Knowles has spent most of his career as a cult favorite, crafting house and techno tracks with a scruffy, handmade feel that borders on the otherworldly; more recently, he's garnered wider attention with the gallery-ready experimental ambience of such releases as his 2019 album, "Loom Dream." On the decks, he induces dance-floor tremors even when his selections veer toward the gauzy.—*Michaelangelo Matos (March 12.)*

### Sorry
Union Pool

Asha Lorenz and Louis O'Bryen, the young Londoners who pilot Sorry, met in day school and predominately record at home. Despite the cozy circumstances, this band sings only to the night: a mildly debauched rock habitat populated by needy souls hotly pursuing ill-advised romances. For this appearance, a few weeks ahead of its début album, "925," Sorry greets an American crowd for the first time. The New York band youbet, an intimate pop vehicle for the lithe singer-songwriter Nick Llobet, opens.—*Jay Ruttenberg (March 12.)*

### Kandace Springs
Jazz Standard

No one could accuse the understated yet tough-minded singer Kandace Springs of disrespecting her elders. On her new album, "The Women Who Raised Me," Springs reëxamines the legacies of a broad swath of iconic musicians, including Bonnie Raitt, Nina Simone, and Lauryn Hill, linking the likes of Sade's "Pearls" to Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit" by way of her own contained passion.—*S.F. (March 12-15.)*

### Cassy
Avant Gardner

The house-music artist Cassy Britton earned global notice as a mid-two-thousands resident at Berlin's Panoramabar, where she spun austere minimal techno with rough-and-ready brio. For more than a decade, her focus has been shifting to glossier house—her 2019 EP, "Next Generation," features spacious nineties-throwback house jams full of romping tom-toms and echo-trailed vocal samples. That feel extended to her Ibiza Play House events last summer and will apply to this Bushwick appearance as well.—*M.M. (March 14.)*

### Angélique Kidjo
Carnegie Hall

Angélique Kidjo entered the world in 1960, the same year that her native Benin declared its independence. At Carnegie Hall, the indefatigable singer salutes that anniversary and those of other West African nations along with her own sixtieth birthday. Kidjo barely needs a microphone to transfix an audience, but she has assembled a starry support cast nonetheless, including the Senegalese titan Baaba Maal, Brittany Howard of Alabama Shakes, and the Nigerian Afropop singer Yemi Alade.—*J.R. (March 14.)*

### ShooterGang Kony
Baby's All Right

Chaos rules the music of ShooterGang Kony, whose unruly lyrics are surpassed only by off-kilter flows that dare you to question rhythm and time. At first glance, the Sacramento rapper can come off as irreverent or heartless, but on his gripping new album, "Red Paint Reverend," he balances dark humor and shit talk with doses of sobering introspection—quiet reminders that, although the songs may sound West Coast breezy, the stakes remain high. For this show, he opens for the similarly loose Vallejo trio SOB X RBE.—*Briana Younger (March 14.)*

### Jorge Drexler
Town Hall

Though the Uruguayan singer Jorge Drexler has fiddled with electronic sounds and pop

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arrangements on past albums, his 2017 release, “Salvavidas de Hielo,” was a return to the acoustic folksiness and lyrical storytelling that give him the quality of a woodsy troubadour from another era. The songs are already bucolic and minimal, but he promises to strip things back even more for “Silente,” an intimate tour he’s bringing to the U.S. for the first time after stretches in seventeen other countries.—*Julyssa Lopez (March 15.)*

### Kalie Shorr

#### Mercury Lounge

The Nashville-based singer-songwriter Kalie Shorr is up front about her propensity to bare it all and sometimes overshare. “Too Much to Say,” the first track on her début album, “Open Book,” from last year, puts the listener on notice: “I’ve got more unclaimed baggage than an airport lost and found.” Luckily, her voice is winsome enough to offset her tough-country-girl veneer, and it goes to work on a surfeit of memorable turns of phrase, such as when she admits to “taking advice from my vices.”—*K. Leander Williams (March 16.)*

### Aventura

#### Radio City Music Hall

Like many boy bands of the early two-thousands, Aventura drew screaming, starry-eyed fans to stadium shows with honeyed melodies and aching romance. But the Bronx-born quartet was markedly different from other groups: they enraptured audiences by mixing traditional bachata with modern pop, rap, and R. & B. The lead singer, Romeo Santos, known for his whispered, impossibly high-pitched vocal delivery, broke out as a major solo artist in 2011, but the band members have reunited for “Inmortal,” their first tour in ten years—proof of their lasting allure.—*J.L. (March 16-19 and March 22.)*

### Rod Wave

#### Webster Hall

In another life and time, the Florida rapper Rod Wave would’ve been a bluesman. His wrenching songs transform pain—ceaseless, existential pain—into raw and soulful hip-hop that can snatch the breath from your chest; there is nothing glamorous about the hustle, nothing redemptive about the violence, no glory in his suffering. And yet his latest release, “Ghetto Gospel,” like the projects that came before it, is captivating and beautiful in its unblinking humanity, anchored by raps seamlessly commingled with singing.—*B.Y. (March 17.)*

## ART

### “Cauleen Smith: Mutualities”

#### Whitney Museum

Smith’s hand-sewn banners were a highlight of the 2017 Whitney Biennial; vibrant and mournful indictments of slavery’s long aftermath, they hung from the museum’s ceiling. Another example of Smith’s radical heraldry appears in the centerpiece of this small, powerful show on the Whitney’s fifth floor: her short film “Sojourner,” from 2018. A group of black women, dressed in glamorous, futurist ensembles, solemnly carry orange signs emblazoned with quotes by the jazz legend Alice Coltrane. (“At dawn, sit at the feet of action” reads one; “At noon, be the hand of might” reads another.) Painterly cinematography unites a fragmented pilgrimage to a beach, a protest rally in Chicago, and the Watts Towers, in Los Angeles. The film concludes at the sculptor Noah Purifoy’s otherworldly outdoor museum in Joshua Tree National Park, where the procession of women settles to listen to a 1977 recording of a statement issued by the black-feminist group the Combahee River Collective. If the imagery in “Sojourner” looks familiar, it’s because Smith has reimagined Bill Ray’s 1966 photo essay for *Life* magazine, which documented young men in Watts a year after the 1965 riots. By casting her stylish ensemble as insurgent women regrouping in a suspenseful pre- or post-revolutionary pause, Smith merges utopian futurism with wistful revision.—*Johanna Fateman (Through May 17.)*

### “Dorothea Lange”

#### Museum of Modern Art

Lange began her influential thirty-year career as a photographer and social crusader doing field work with her husband, the economist Paul Taylor, producing reports that the government handed out to promote the New Deal. (Imagine the Trump Administration hiring artists to expose the plight of the working poor.) Language—including the handwritten notes that accompanied her pictures—was central to Lange’s project. The exhibition “Words & Pictures,” intelligently curated by Sarah Hermanson Meister, gives equal respect to her photographic prints (ninety-six) and her publications (seven, in handsome shadow boxes and vitrines). Her best-known images are of indelible faces in hardscrabble places; an entire wall of the show is devoted to Florence Owens Thompson, the subject of Lange’s famous “Migrant Mother,” taken in 1936. But she also had a humane eye for text, like the hand-painted sign she encountered at a California gas station in 1938: “This is your country don’t let the big men take it away from you.”—*Andrea K. Scott (Through May 9.)*

### “Judd”

#### Museum of Modern Art

Donald Judd was the last great revolutionary of modern art. The gorgeous boxy objects—he refused to call them sculptures—that the American artist constructed between the early nineteen-sixties and his death, from cancer, in 1994, irreversibly altered the character of Western aesthetic experience. They displaced traditional contemplation with newfangled confrontation. That’s the key trope of Minimalism, a term that Judd despised but one that will tag him until the end of time. His works register as material propositions of certain principles—chiefly, openness and clarity. They aren’t about anything. They afford no traction for analysis while making you more or less conscious of your physical relation to them, and to the space that you and they share. As installed by the curator Ann Temkin, with perfectly paced samples of Judd’s major motifs—among them, floor-to-ceiling “stacks” of shelflike units, mostly of metal-framed, tinted Plexiglas, which expose and flavor the space they occupy—the second of the show’s four big rooms amounts to a Monument Valley of the minimalist sublime. Don’t miss it. The chance surely won’t recur to take the measure of an artist whose influence on our art and, sub rosa, our lives in common, remains beyond large, engulfing.—*Peter Schjeldahl. (Through July 11.)*

### “Peter Saul”

#### New Museum

The timeliest as well as the rudest painting show of this winter happens to be the first-ever New York museum survey of this American aesthetic rapscallion. Recognition so delayed bemuses almost as much as a reminder of the artist’s current age: eighty-five, which seems impossible. Saul’s cartoony style—raucously grotesque, often with contorted figures engaged in (and quite enjoying) intricate violence, caricatures of politicians from Nixon to Trump that come off as much fond as fierce, and cheeky travesties of classic paintings by Rembrandt, Picasso, and de Kooning—suggests the gall of an adolescent allowed to run amok. It takes time to become aware of how well Saul paints, with lyrically kinetic, intertwined forms and an improbable approximation of chiaroscuro, managed with neon-toned Day-Glo acrylics. He sneaks whispery formal nuances into works whose predominant effect may be as subtle as that of a steel garbage can being kicked downstairs. Not everyone takes the time. Saul’s effrontery has long driven fastidious souls, including me years ago, from galleries. Now I see him as part of a story of art and culture that has been unspooling since the nineteen-fifties; one in which Saul, formerly a pariah, seems ever more a paladin.—*P.S. (Through May 31.)*

### “Vida Americana”

#### Whitney Museum

The subtitle of this thumpingly great show, “Mexican Muralists Remake American Art, 1924-1945,” picks an overdue art-historical fight. The usual story of American art in those two decades revolves around young, often immigrant aesthetes striving to absorb European modernism. A triumphalist tale composed backward from its climax—the postwar success of Abstract Expressionism—it brushes aside the prevalence, in the thirties, of politically themed figurative art: social realism, more or less, which became ideologically toxic with the onset of the Cold War. What to do with the mighty legacy of the time’s big three Mexican painters, Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros? As little as possible has seemed the rule, despite the seminal influence of Orozco and Siqueiros on the young Jackson Pollock. But, with some two hundred works by sixty artists and abundant documentary material, the curator Barbara Haskell reweaves the sense and sensations of the era to bring it alive. Without the Mexican precedents of amplified scale and passionate vigor, the development of Abstract

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Expressionism in general, and that of Pollock in particular, lacks crucial sense. As for the politics, consider the persistently leftward tilt of American art culture ever since—a residual hankering, however sotto voce, to change the world.—*P.S. (Through May 17.)*

### "Zilia Sánchez"
### Museo del Barrio

"Soy Isla" is the title of Sánchez's buoyant retrospective, and, indeed, a trio of islands—Cuba, Manhattan, Puerto Rico—shaped the career of this soulful hybridist, who is finally in the spotlight she has so long deserved. (The show arrives after a triumphant run at the Phillips Collection, in Washington, D.C.) Born in Havana in 1926, Sánchez lived in Manhattan for a few years, in the early nineteen-sixties, where her efforts shifted from competent, earthy abstractions, inflected by Art Informel (seen early in the exhibition), to radical shaped canvases, which she has continued to refine for the past fifty years in her longtime home of San Juan. These pared-down bicolor symmetries, which protrude and recede—imagine a Rorschach test co-designed by Lee Bontecou and Ellsworth Kelly—are at once carnal and cosmic. Not exactly paintings but not really sculptures, they float something new, in a restrained palette of black, white, peach, and fathomless blues.—*A.K.S. (Through March 22.)*

### Agnes Denes
### The Shed

**CHELSEA** This sui-generis artist has long envisioned—and occasionally realized—exceptionally humane public projects. Her best-known piece is "Wheatfield—A Confrontation," from 1982, for which the New York-based artist cultivated two acres of grain near the Twin Towers to draw attention to global hunger. In 1993, Denes transformed a gravel pit in Finland into a small mountain patterned with eleven thousand trees, each one assigned its own human custodian. New drone footage of that piece is on view in the expansive, overdue retrospective "Absolutes and Intermediates," impeccably curated by Emma Enderby (assisted by Adeze Wilford). Two numinous sculptures, commissioned for the exhibition, bring a pair of the artist's schematic "Pyramid" drawings—a series she began in 1971—into three dimensions. In the first new work, conceived on paper in 1976, thousands of translucent, compostable bricks form a luminous seventeen-foot-high pyramid. In the second sculpture, an electromagnetic model for the 1984 drawing "Teardrop—Monument to Being Earthbound," a glowing nine-inch-high ellipse levitates like a candle flame above a circular base—a melancholic architectonic memorial for our threatened planet.—*J.F. (Through March 22.)*

### Sydney Licht
### Markel

**CHELSEA** For years, this New York artist has been "looking at the overlooked," as the art historian Norman Bryson described still-life painting, often reserving her most tender regard for the pretty boxes and bags that are the throwaway trophies of shopping. The charming, if scattershot, canvases in Licht's new show are colorful elegies to the incidental, providing a good excuse for the artist to revel in domestic pattern and decoration. A cerulean-and-olive harlequin grid graces a sleeveless blouse on a white hanger; curvilinear geometries harmonize in a sweet picture of a Wiener Werkstätte-like pillow against the slatted back of a chair.—*A.K.S. (Through March 28.)*

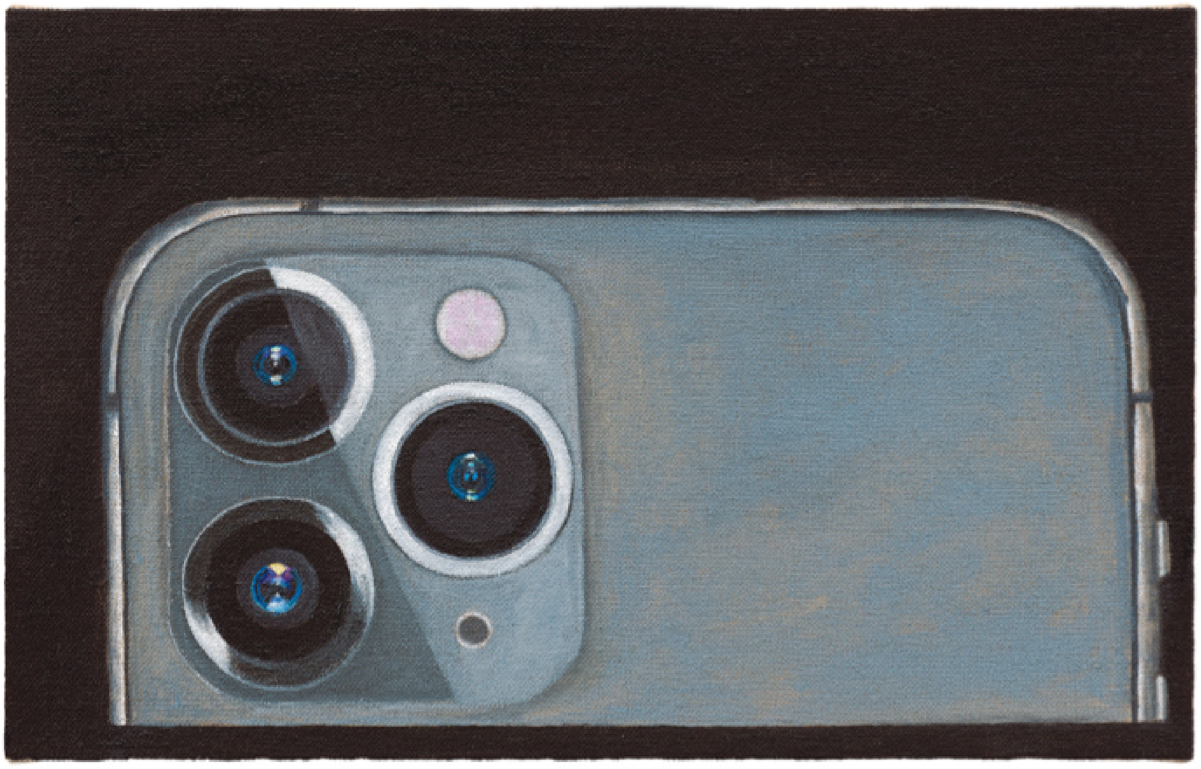
### Curtis Talwst Santiago
### The Drawing Center

**DOWNTOWN** In "Can't I Alter," a transporting multimedia installation, this Canadian-Trinidadian artist continues his speculative exploration of a Moorish knight, whom he discovered—online, some years ago—in a Northern Renaissance painting of a busy public square in Portugal. After locating the anonymous sixteenth-century work in Lisbon, Santiago's fascination with the representation of this black European nobleman was complicated by the painting's horrific background scene, which depicts the torture of Africans. In drawings, paintings, sculptures, and a video, Santiago constructs a mythic past for the figure he has dubbed the "J'ouvert Knight," who wears multicolored, beaded armor. The artist draws on his own family history (both real and imagined) to create faux artifacts—from the glass nose of a defaced bust to replicated fragments of medieval drawings—that he displays in stage-set-like ruins that evoke both ancient stone walls and contemporary construction scaffolding. An accompanying poster identifies the diverse objects on view, mimicking the language of museum labels as it illuminates the conceptual complexity of Santiago's premise.—*J.F. (Through May 10.)*

### Allison Schulnik
### P.P.O.W.

**CHELSEA** Sticky, frenzied accretions of colorful paint resemble the wreckage of tiny tornadoes in this California artist's new show, titled "Hatch." Schulnik's distinctive impasto technique lends her subjects—babies, seashells, wild animals, pets—a curious depth. The built-up areas jut out from the surface of her pictures in defiance of pictorial logic. In "Rickles #1," the haunch of a Pekinese emerges from darkness like an island of buttercream. "Tupelo #1" portrays the artist's daughter as a wide-eyed infant on a red rug—a smeary, sweetly grotesque alien in patchwork overalls. Schulnik's flickering animation "Moth" is a lovely foil to her pigment-laden canvases, which have the heft of bas-reliefs. Set to a spare composition by Erik Satie, its gouache-on-paper images pair washy translucence with chalky voids in a lovely, three-minute story of metamorphosis.—*J.F. (Through March 21.)*

## AT THE GALLERIES



© LEIDY CHURCHMAN / COURTESY MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

Is there anything **Leidy Churchman** can't paint? Among the subjects of the twenty-one paintings in the New York phenom's new show at the Matthew Marks gallery (through April 18) are a fever-dream bedroom, a moonrise, a girl on a bike, a rose garden, a monkey-filled forest from the Ramayana, hypnotic abstractions, and a laundry-room sign. The palette runs from monochrome black to hot purple and pink; dimensions change from a scant dozen inches to more than ten feet wide. The only logic at work is intuitive, even oracular. The mood is less image-overload restless than optimistically omnivorous—Churchman seems hungry to paint the whole world in all its mystery and ordinariness, two categories that often collide here. In Churchman's deft hands, a cropped closeup of an iPhone 11 (pictured above) assumes a third-eye mysticism worthy of Hilma af Klint.—*Andrea K. Scott*

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## ORCHESTRAS

It would be impossible to summarize in just two evenings the impact that the conductor **Michael Tilson Thomas** has had on the **San Francisco Symphony** during his celebrated tenure as its music director, which began in 1995 and concludes in June. Assuming the helm of an esteemed, technically secure ensemble, Tilson Thomas endowed the institution with a penchant for bold gestures, a taste for adventure, and a zeal for American music. In his final Carnegie Hall appearances as the orchestra's leader, March 17-18, the conductor leads two representative programs. The first features the local première of a new John Adams piece, a passionate Saint-Saëns cello concerto (with Gautier Capuçon as the soloist), and a Stravinsky ballet ("The Firebird"); the second is devoted to Mahler's explosive Symphony No. 6.—*Steve Smith*

ILLUSTRATION BY LORENZO GRITTI

## CLASSICAL MUSIC

### "Der Fliegende Holländer"
Metropolitan Opera House

François Girard's new staging of Wagner's "Der Fliegende Holländer" ("The Flying Dutchman") follows the playbook he established with his captivating 2013 production of the composer's "Parsifal" rather closely. The problem is that "Holländer" is a different game. Its tale of the doomed romance between the accursed sea captain of the title (a forceful but colorless Evgeny Nikitin) and Senta, the woman who would follow him into death (a ragged-voiced Anja Kampe), hinges on her wild-eyed obsession with him. This has very little to do with the protracted rituals and existential agony found in "Parsifal" 's retelling of the Grail legend, but Girard presses those elements in a misapprehension of "Holländer" 's more volatile energy and dramatic pace; the orchestra sounds careful yet unpolished under Valery Gergiev.—*Oussama Zahr (March 10 at 8 and March 14 at 1.)*

### New York Philharmonic
David Geffen Hall

The powerful conductor Valery Gergiev is a compelling advocate for Russian music, and his latest New York Philharmonic program is smack-dab at the heart of his favored repertoire. Opening with Rodion Shchedrin's Concerto for Orchestra No. 1 ("Naughty Limericks"), Gergiev carries on with Rachmaninoff's towering Piano Concerto No. 3 (with Denis Matsuev at the keyboard) and concludes with Stravinsky's brilliant ballet "Petrushka."—*Steve Smith (March 12 at 7:30 and March 13-14 at 8.)*

### Chamber Music Society
Various locations

Modern works take center stage in two markedly divergent offerings from the Chamber Music Society this week. The first, an intimate affair in the Rose Studio, explores unorthodox tonalities, mingling a world première by Alexandra du Bois with staple pieces by Schoenberg, Ben Johnston, and Tristan Murail. In the other program, a tantalizing combo of Alessio Bax, Lucille Chung, Ayano Kataoka, and Ian David Rosenbaum plays Bartók's riotously inventive Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion, flanked by comfortable fare from Tchaikovsky and Dohnányi.—*S.S. (March 12 at 7:30 and March 15 at 5.)*

### Yarn / Wire
Issue Project Room

Yarn/Wire, two pianists and two percussionists with an insatiable appetite for fresh repertoire, extends its fruitful relationship with Issue Project Room, a Brooklyn venue that has fostered many of the group's most ambitious undertakings. For this engagement, the quartet collaborates with the composer and electronic musician Ben Vida for the New York première of "Always Already," which also features the fine vocalist Nina Dante. Aaron David Ross, a composer, producer, and media artist, opens with a project titled "Filter Failure."—*S.S. (March 12 at 8.)*

### Philadelphia Orchestra
Carnegie Hall

Yannick Nézet-Séguin and his Philadelphia players helm Carnegie Hall's second full cycle of Beethoven's symphonies this season. Instead of playing through the works in dutiful chronology, they kick things off with the four most famous notes the composer ever wrote—the opening motif of Symphony No. 5, the very sound of fate rapping at the door. Nézet-Séguin pairs it with the softer hues of Symphony No. 6, "Pastoral." Also playing: Leon Botstein and the American Symphony Orchestra partner with the Marcus Roberts Trio and the singer Catherine Russell for a tribute to Duke Ellington's classical-jazz style (March 12 at 8).—*O.Z. (March 13 at 8.)*

### JACK Quartet
National Sawdust

John Zorn, a chameleonic avant-gardist, breaks down the string-quartet form and puts it back together with his own kind of rigor. Pieces such as "Cat O'Nine Tails" and "Memento Mori" deal in experimental tropes—the strings wail, skitter, and lean into dissonances—but they never lose their form nor their emotional quality. The JACK Quartet, which mines contemporary music for expressivity, plays all of Zorn's string quartets across two nights.—*O.Z. (March 13-14 at 8.)*

### Chamber Music for Strings
Spectrum

In a pair of separate shows, the cozy Brooklyn venue Spectrum offers complementary visions of contemporary music for strings. In a matinée performance, the esteemed cellist Daniel Gaisford plays almost untenably intense ruminations for unaccompanied cello by Michael Hersch. Grab a bite nearby, then return in the evening for a set by the up-and-coming Bergamot Quartet, which hails from Baltimore and will take up residence at Mannes College this fall; the group's program includes works by Caroline Shaw, Felipe Lara, Suzanne Farrin, Paul Wiancko, and Ledah Finck, a member of the quartet.—*S.S. (March 15 at 3 and 7.)*

### New York Festival of Song
Kaufman Music Center

For its last main-stage offering of the season, New York Festival of Song considers "The Art of Pleasure"—the program's title—in its many iterations. Debussy's "En Bateau" ("On the Boat"), a piano four-hander that sways on lazy waves, opens the evening, which then finds its way to the boudoir (with immodest numbers including Bernstein's "It's Gotta Be Bad to Be Good" and the Kinks' "Lola"), Viennese operetta, and postmodern comedy. The pianists Steven Blier, Michael Barrett, and Shawn Chang accompany four singers from Caramoor's young-artist program.—*O.Z. (March 17 at 8.)*

## DANCE

### "Riverdance 25th Anniversary"
Radio City Music Hall

Remember "Riverdance"? The Irish-dance show originated in a single seven-minute act at the 1994 Eurovision Song Contest and went on to become a massive juggernaut, seen by over

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twenty-seven million people worldwide. It also put Irish step dancing, which before then was a rather localized form with folk roots, on the map in a massive way, amplifying it with flashy stage effects, large battalions of dancers, and a score meant to keep the audience's hearts pumping. Thousands of young Irish dancers have filled out the show's ranks since its inception, tapping and jumping in unison, arms held straight by their sides. After a ten-year absence, "Riverdance" returns to Radio City Music Hall with a new recording of Bill Whelan's original score, a few new numbers, and updated costumes, lighting, and projections.—*Marina Harss (March 10-15.)*

## Scottish Ballet

### Joyce Theatre

The last time this company came to town, three years ago, it performed a wonderfully evocative piece by Christopher Bruce, set to poems by Dylan Thomas, that really showed off the excellence and the commitment of its dancers. The ballets included in its current run at the Joyce are decidedly more contemporary in look and in tone. One, "Sibila," was created by a dancer in the company, Sophie Laplane, now its resident choreographer. In a series of encounters performed in a style by turns angular and fluid, the work navigates the ins and outs of human relationships. The wittiest sections are set to whistled ditties—*sibila* means "whistling" in Latin. The other half of the program is taken up by "MC 14/22 (Ceci est mon corps)," a work for twelve male dancers—not accidentally, the number of Jesus' apostles—by the French choreographer Angelin Preljoçaj.—*M.H. (March 10-15.)*

## Patricia Guerrero

### Baryshnikov Arts Center

Young, bold, and beautiful, Guerrero is the kind of flamenco artist who can honor the past while appearing of the present, secure enough in the old ways to blend in other styles. Less overtly avant-garde and feminist than most of her recent works, "Proceso Eterno," her contribution to Flamenco Festival New York 2020, is intimate. She dances in playful exchange with the singer Sergio El Colorao, the guitarist Dani de Morón, and the percussionist Agustín Diassera—and in silence, in searching dialogue with herself.—*Brian Seibert (March 13-14.)*

## Kazu Kumagai

### 92nd Street Y

For nearly two decades, Kumagai has been one of the world's top improvising tap dancers. Japanese-born but deeply versed in the art's African-American roots, he's focussed on sound; his solos tend to drill down, build up steam, and explode in dense discharges of high-speed particles. But he's also a sweetheart, and that side of him should emerge in "Good Rhythm Wonderful Life," part of the 92nd Street Y's Harkness Dance Festival. Inspired by his daughter's reading of Maya Angelou's "Life Doesn't Frighten Me," the show features Alex Blake on bass, Akio Mokuno on keyboards, and the subtly charming Lisa La Touche as a guest hoofer.—*B.S. (March 13-14.)*

## Leonor Leal

### Le Poisson Rouge

Traditionally, the heart of flamenco is song. But for Leal's evening in Flamenco Festival New York 2020 she does without it. A skilled and grounded innovator, she experiments with the percussionist Antonio Moreno, who might play a washboard or a table or the objects on the table.—*B.S. (March 14.)*

## FLAMENCO FESTIVAL

ILLUSTRATION BY DAIANA RUIZ

"Fla.co.men": the title says it all. In this show, part of Flamenco Festival New York 2020 (at Skirball, on March 13), **Israel Galván**—an astounding dancer, capable of the most exciting rapid-fire footwork—deconstructs flamenco to an even more extreme degree than he has in the past. For seventy-five minutes, on a stage strewn with musical instruments and sheets of paper, he riffs in a random-seeming, improvisatory way. He makes strange yelping sounds, flickers his fingers, plays a drum with his foot, sits on the floor moving only his hands. Then, in bursts, he dances explosively. The music is an interesting combination of saxophone, violin, tambourine, and, yes, flamenco guitar. It's mad, and at times self-indulgent, but there are flashes of genius in there as well.—*Marina Harss*

## THE THEATRE

## About Love

### Sheen Center

Will Pomerantz adapted this charming chamber musical, presented by Culture Project, from Ivan Turgenev's novella "First Love." A callow but gallant sixteen-year-old (Jeffrey Kringer) falls hard for a captivating but penniless twenty-one-year-old daughter of a princess (Silvia Bond) and joins the menagerie of helpless suitors who cater to her whims throughout the summer of 1833. The setting is nineteenth-century Moscow (Whitney Locher's costumes are nicely precise) and Nancy Harrow's score is jazz, but both the script and the songs are on the same sweet, wistful wavelength. Turgenev's tale is delightfully attuned to the heightened emotional nuances of a crush, and the actors take turns reciting much of the text while enacting its story—which works thanks to Pomerantz's smart, playful staging and the well-selected cast.—*Rollo Romig (Through March 22.)*

## Cambodian Rock Band

### Pershing Square Signature Center

Fact and fiction, past and present are interwoven in Lauren Yee's play with music. When a young Cambodian-American, Neary (Courtney Reed), arrives in Phnom Penh to help prosecute Comrade Duch (Francis Jue), a real-life Khmer Rouge official who oversaw the killing of thousands in the notorious prison camp S21, she does not realize that the case is going to hit so close to home. A flashback takes us to 1975, when the rise of the genocidal Communist regime put an end to the young rock band the Cyclos—and we discover what happened to the guitarist Chum (Joe Ngo) and the bassist Leng (Moses Villarama). Yee's storytelling is undermined by credibility-testing coincidences, but Chay Yew's production,

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I first saw the extraordinary **"Caroline, or Change"** in 2003, when it premièred Off Broadway, at the Public Theatre. With a book and a libretto by Tony Kushner and music by the star composer Jeanine Tesori, the piece, directed by George C. Wolfe, featured the unforgettable Tonya Pinkins as Caroline, a black maid working in the home of a Jewish family in civil-rights-era Louisiana. It struck me as outstanding on a number of levels, chief among them that it was the first time since "Angels in America" that Kushner seemed to inhabit his characters without putting ideology first. Today, this deeply unusual musical—it feels more like a songspiel, in the end—is being revived under the organizing eye of the director Michael Longhurst (for Roundabout Theatre Company, starting previews on March 13, at Studio 54). The British powerhouse Sharon D Clarke takes the lead role, one that says as much about the human condition and the way that power works as it does about our desire to let the world know that we exist beyond our will to survive.—*Hilton Als*

for the Signature Theatre, comes alive when the actors turn into the Cyclos to perform songs by vintage Cambodian artists and the contemporary Los Angeles band Dengue Fever.—*Elisabeth Vincentelli (Through March 22.)*

### Coal Country
Public

In 2010, in West Virginia, a massive explosion killed twenty-nine coal miners in a mine called Upper Big Branch. Unusually, Don Blankenship, the C.E.O. of the company that ran the mine, went on trial for his role in the disaster, eventually serving a year in prison. (Perfectly unchastened, he's now the Constitution Party's candidate for President.) This outstanding, outraged, life-filled documentary play, with a script that Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen built verbatim from interviews (and which Blank directs), tells the story from the perspectives of the miners and their families. That would be reason enough to see this show—but it also features excellent original songs by the legendary Steve Earle, which are performed in this intimate space by Earle himself and beautifully integrated into the narrative.—*R.R. (Through April 5.)*

### Dana H.
Vineyard

In 1997, a woman named Dana Higginbotham was abducted by an ex-convict and member of the Aryan Brotherhood. He dragged her from motel to motel around the South for five months, abusing her physically and mentally. Higginbotham happens to be the mother of the playwright Lucas Hnath ("A Doll's House, Part 2," "Hillary and Clinton"), who turned the story into a play. And not just any play—this is a channelling, an exorcism, and a tribute. The brilliant concept is that the actress Deirdre O'Connell, alone onstage, lip-synchs—with virtuosic precision—to edited segments of interviews with the actual Dana H. (Steve Cosson, the artistic director of the docu-theatre company the Civilians, conducted the interviews in 2015.) Directed by Les Waters with chilling precision and his usual skill for creating an eerie atmosphere, this Vineyard Theatre production is as stunning as it is harrowing.—*E.V. (Through April 11.)*

### Girl from the North Country
Belasco

The songs in this musical tragedy, which arrives on Broadway after a première in London and a New York début at the Public Theatre, are all from Bob Dylan's vast catalogue, but it's not really a jukebox show; few of its twenty-one tunes are among his best known. The playwright and director Conor McPherson has situated them in Duluth, Minnesota, in the final months of 1934, in a failing guesthouse where desperate characters—a boxer, a Bible salesman, a morphine-addicted doctor—converge. It's a play about a community whose members have a near-total inability to connect with one another, a theme that McPherson plumbs movingly—and one that only exacerbates the inherent disjointedness of this songbook musical. But that's a minor complaint. The cast is impeccable, and Dylan's songs sound unbelievably good.—*R.R. (Open run.)*

### Ivanka 2020
Joe's Pub

Ivanka Trump didn't plan to become a political puppet mind-controlled via a magical whistle bewitched by Rasputin; she just wants to shop at Bergdorf Goodman. But Ryan Raftery's musical comedy—inspired by "The Manchurian Candidate" and the 1997 animated film "Anastasia," and directed by Jay Turton—makes things tough for the First Daughter. Raftery himself dons Ivanka's pumps and commits to the extended shtick. The "Anastasia" bits get old, and easy jabs at Trump's gross misogyny are cringeworthy, but Raftery's asides and meta-jokes entertain, as do Ivanka's peculiar affects: dramatic hair flips and a unique approach to enunciation ("qweh poh quh," she clucks, considering her father's dealings with Ukraine). It's camp in the highest measure, with playful costume changes (from a Givenchy Druid robe to a Republican tracksuit to a red power suit) and song parodies of hits including "Shallow." There's just enough cheesy ridiculousness to accompany a night of drinks at Joe's Pub.—*Maya Phillips (Through March 13.)*

### The Perplexed
City Center Stage I

We know that Richard Greenberg can write, as plays such as "Take Me Out" and "The Babylon Line" attest, so you have to wonder what is going on with his confounding new show, now at Manhattan Theatre Club, under Lynne Meadow's direction—the title may well refer to some audience members' reactions. "The Perplexed" takes place during a wedding of the children of two wealthy New York clans, who attempt to forsake their long-running feud for the occasion. Family members exchange would-be bons mots, reveal secrets, and introduce plotlines only to promptly abandon them. Conversations take place in the foreground as other characters sit silently in the background: Are they

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9:12
Dashboard
Markets open
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DJIA 26,531.30 330.26 (1.26%)
S&P 500 2,947.39 36.77 (1.26%)
NASDAQ 7,972.46 100.19 (1.27%)
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Day Gain %
GVRC 40 42.86 14.40 0.84%
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PTYH 98 85.28 -16.85 -3.24%
HGBW 65 65.34 12.25 2.65%
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meant to hear what's going on? What are they doing there? Only Frank Wood, as the father of the bride, manages to etch a fully fleshed character, playing a lost soul who looks befuddled by the proceedings.—*E.V. (Through March 29.)*

### The Unsinkable Molly Brown
### Abrons Arts Center

The musical "The Unsinkable Molly Brown," which was adapted for the big screen in 1964 (starring the unmatched Debbie Reynolds), is the unsinkably cute story of the real activist and all-around do-gooder. Arriving in a mining town, Molly helps revitalize the community, makes a fortune, rallies for unions, and climbs up the social ladder—all before, famously, surviving the sinking of the Titanic. The Transport Group's production updates the original with a new book and some previously unheard songs by Meredith Willson. Beth Malone, as Molly, is perfection—stunningly effervescent, plucky, and honey-sweet, with a soaring voice. Whitney Bashor and David Aron Damane, as Molly's best friend and her husband, respectively, deliver crisp, operatic vocals, though the latter lacks chemistry with Malone. The choreography, by Kathleen Marshall, who also directs, has the flair of old Broadway, with lifts, leaps, and stomps. The second act, however, lacks momentum, and the production feels rife with filler—extraneous songs and scenes that accomplish the seemingly impossible task of slowing Molly down.—*M.P. (Through April 5.)*

### We're Gonna Die
### Second Stage

Young Jean Lee wrote the script and lyrics of this hilarious, wrenching, and wise monologue interspersed with fine, bright songs about loneliness, sickness, aging, and death. It's a show in which a song with a chorus of "When you get old / All your friends will die / And you will be a burden to the world" is a full-on banger and, weirdly, makes you feel better. In its original production, in 2011, a lot of its charm emanated from its indie spareness and from Lee's own unstudied performance as the lead. Here that role goes to Janelle McDermoth, who's a total star, with endless charisma and a magnificent voice. As directed and choreographed by Raja Feather Kelly, this version's staging is sleeker (Tuce Yasak designed the dazzling lighting) and its arrangements poppier. But it works just as well because McDermoth never plays it falsely.—*R.R. (Through March 22.)*

### West Side Story
### Broadway Theatre

An infuriating example of what happens when a powerful style calcifies into shtick. For his fourth outing on Broadway, the Belgian director Ivo van Hove has given himself a gorgeous, youthful, diverse cast to work with—Isaac Powell as a lithe and jittery Tony and the spirited Shereen Pimentel as Maria are highlights, as are Yesenia Ayala's Anita and Dharon E. Jones's Riff—only to dwarf them with video footage streamed on billboard-size screens above their heads. As a metaphor—for the insignificance of these characters' lives in a hostile world, perhaps?—the technique is banal; as a theatrical device, it is a ludicrous waste. As is his wont, van Hove has amplified the play's darker elements and snuffed out any lightness that might temper its tragedy. (Farewell, "I Feel Pretty.") This is all the more disappointing considering all that is promising here, including Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker's choreography, which closes the gap between modernist constructivism and TikTok preening, and the exquisite rumble scene, which offers a startling glimpse of what van Hove could do were he to return to eye level and reground himself in the idiom of the stage.—*Alexandra Schwartz (Reviewed in our issue of 3/2/20.) (Open run.)*

### The Woman in Black
### McKittrick Hotel

You can't go wrong with an old-fashioned ghost story filled with jump scares—which may be why "The Woman in Black" has been running in London for thirty years. Now Stephen Mallatratt's adaptation of Susan Hill's 1983 novel has come to New York, to the same building as "Sleep No More." The premise is simple: a London solicitor named Arthur Kipps (David Acton) travels to an isolated coastal house to sort out a newly deceased woman's papers; things go bump in the night. Mallatratt added an unnecessarily complicated storytelling device involving a play within the play (an actor portrayed by Ben Porter helps Kipps narrate his tale). The show is at its best when the director Robin Herford unleashes such simple theatrical devices as sudden loud noises, moody lighting, and periods of pitch-black darkness to create an atmosphere of dread. If only the running time—which, at two hours, feels padded—were as spartan as the staging.—*E.V. (Through April 19.)*

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## MOVIES

### The Burnt Orange Heresy

If modern art, purveyed or perused, strikes you as a slippery trade, then Claes Bang is your man. In "The Square" (2017), he played the director of an art museum. In this new film, directed by Giuseppe Capotondi and based on a thriller by Charles Willeford, he plays an art critic named James Figueras, who has a keen eye on the market and a nose for fraud. Together with a newfound lover, Berenice Hollis (Elizabeth Debicki), he is invited to a villa on Lake Como, where a reclusive collector, Joseph Cassidy (Mick Jagger), yearns to get his hands on a painting—any painting—by the equally elusive Jerome Debney (Donald Sutherland). Cassidy hires Figueras to get whatever he can, though the mission is complicated by Berenice, whose motives are more opaque. Sadly, the movie steadily loses steam and grace, but the early scenes display a wicked suavity as the untrustworthy characters toy with one another's lusts and fates.—*Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 3/9/20.) (In wide release.)*

### Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach

Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub's 1968 bio-pic about the composer Johann Sebastian Bach illuminates the artistic conflicts of their own time. The harpsichordist and organist Gustav Leonhardt plays the lead role, performing Bach's music alongside other luminaries of the period-instrument movement (including Nikolaus Harnoncourt) in costume and on location in historic churches and homes. The directors emphasize Bach's relentless practical battles on behalf of his art—the indifference of clerical authorities, the struggle for money, the hostility of scholars, the quest for patronage—and depict such masterpieces as the "St. Matthew Passion" as just another day's work. The performances are filmed in long takes at incisive angles, placing Bach squarely in the environment that his music supremely transcends; the result suggests the anti-romantic credo of a pair of free spirits who show Bach subordinating his own personality and personal circumstances in the creation of an enduring, universal art. In German.—*Richard Brody (Metrograph, March 12, and streaming.)*

### Joan of Arc

For the second installment in Bruno Dumont's diptych, the director follows the visionary confidence of his 2017 rock opera, "Jeannette"—where the child Joan prepares to fight France's English occupiers—with the sombre and ironic balladry of a defeated young warrior facing execution at the hands of her enemies. The ten-year-old Lise Leplat Prudhomme plays Joan, who defies the supercilious King Charles VII (Fabrice Luchini) and leads her troops into disastrous battle, first at the gates of Paris and then at Amiens, where she is captured. Half of the movie is set in and around a cathedral, where she's interrogated by church officials under English command. Adapting a play by Charles Péguy, Dumont transforms the tale into a dialectical spectacle: he stages military musters like Busby Berkeley productions, seethes at the torturers' rationalizations, delights in hearing his actors (especially Fabien Fenet) declaim the scholars' sophistries, and thrills in the pugnacious simplicity of Joan's defiant responses, which reduce her captors' pride and privilege to ridicule. With music by the singer-songwriter Christophe.—*R.B. (Film at Lincoln Center, March 11 and March 13.)*

### Never Rarely Sometimes Always

Eliza Hittman's third feature tells a spare story in compelling detail: Autumn Callahan (Sidney Flanigan), a seventeen-year-old high-school student in a small Pennsylvania town, learns that she's pregnant. Unable to get an abortion in that state without parental consent, she travels to New York, with her cousin Skylar (Talia Ryder), for the procedure. Hittman, who also wrote the script, stays intimately close to Autumn, with attention to her cramped life at home and in school, her independent-minded ferocity, and her physical sufferings (including attempts at ending the pregnancy herself). But, above all, this is a drama of social fabric—of the impact of policy and prejudice on the daily thicket

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of administrative details, the nerve-jangling tension that women endure from ambient sexual aggression, and the oppressive air of surveillance and terror sparked by the war against abortion. The young women's journey to New York—and their encounter with a Philadelphia hipster (Théodore Pellerin)—offers an anguished apprenticeship in the wider world's network of money and power.—*R.B. (In limited release.)*

## Sorry We Missed You

With more sympathy than imagination, Ken Loach dramatizes the plight of the Turners, a family of four in northeastern England, who endure the miseries of the gig economy. Ricky (Kris Hitchen), a construction worker and landscaper, gives up his job to become a delivery driver, believing that he'd make more money under better conditions; he persuades his wife, Abbie (Debbie Honeywood), a home health aide who's deeply devoted to the many patients she visits in her daily rounds, to sell her car—relegating her to long bus rides—so that he can purchase a van. But Ricky's work proves demanding, and his boss (Ross Brewster) is unyielding; with both Abbie and Ricky working longer hours than ever, the Turner children—the teen-age Seb (Rhys Stone) and the younger Liza Jane (Katie Proctor)—go unsupervised. Meanwhile, the family sinks deeper into debt. Loach, working with a script by Paul Laverty, follows the dramatic principle of Murphy's Law, piling an agonizing litany of undeserved misfortunes on characters left blank.—*R.B. (In limited release.)*

## Stage Fright

Alfred Hitchcock's theatre-centered mystery, from 1950, shows how good actors get away with murder. Marlene Dietrich plays Charlotte Inwood, a star of the London stage, who recruits her furtive lover, Jonathan Cooper (Richard Todd), to help conceal her husband's suspicious death. Jonathan, in turn, recruits his steadfast girlfriend, Eve Gill (Jane Wyman), a student at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, to help him skip town. Eve takes matters into her own hands and launches an investigation, but when a handsome detective (Michael Wilding) is put on the case her affections begin to waver. As deceptions and disguises pile up, the layers of mystery grow thicker and the lurid symbolism of material objects is thrust to the fore. In the portrayal of Eve's father, an urbane and audacious seaman dubbed Commodore (Alastair Sim), Hitchcock evokes a deep-rooted, irony-rich complicity of father and daughter—seemingly borrowed from the films of Howard Hawks—that suggests an inner compass that helps guard against chasing the wrong man.—*R.B. (Film Forum, March 13-14, and streaming.)*

## The Way Back

The force of Ben Affleck's perpetually anguished glower suggests depths that this redemption-through-sports drama doesn't reach. He plays Jack Cunningham, a construction worker who lives alone and drinks heavily. Having been, in the mid-nineties, a star athlete at a Catholic high school, he's now summoned by the school's headmaster (John Aylward), a priest, to take over immediately as coach of the boys' basketball team, which has been a disaster ever since Jack graduated. As he grows into his new role, teaching his players both to win and to take responsibility for their actions, his own conflicts—involving grief, alcohol, rage, divorce, and long unresolved troubles from his youth—are inflamed ever more furiously. As written by Brad Ingelsby and directed by Gavin O'Connor, Jack screws up repeatedly, albeit within a bubble of privilege that goes unacknowledged; meanwhile, elements of his early life as well as new problems are conveniently dropped in, making the story line up with a numbing neatness that the hearty cast (including Janina Gavankar, Al Madrigal, and Glynn Turman) can't overcome.—*R.B. (In wide release.)*

## The Whistlers

Corneliu Porumboiu's latest film divides its time, unusually, between Romania and La Gomera, one of the Canary Islands. The inhabitants of the island use whistling to communicate across large distances, a skill that Cristi (Vlad Ivanov) is keen to learn. He's a cop from Bucharest who's in league with the criminal elements he's meant to be investigating, so any means of keeping his secrets safe is a useful trick. The comically twisted plot is adorned with references to older movies, and it's never easy to determine where the center of dramatic interest lies. Our attention, however, is engaged and held by the performers, notably Catrinel Marlon as Cristi's elegant co-conspirator and Rodica Lazar as his boss. As for Ivanov, who has worked with Porumboiu before, he's in suitably phlegmatic form: morose, corruptible, yet not, we suspect, beyond redemption. In Romanian.—*A.L. (3/9/20) (In limited release.)*

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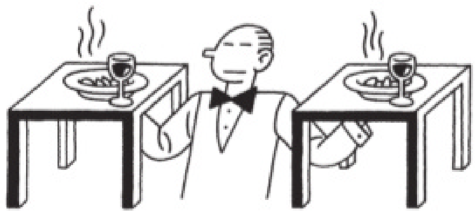
## IN REVIVAL

DORIAN GRAY TOT
lebte und starb

COURTESY ARSENAL

The films of the German director Ulrike Ottinger, whose career stretches back to the nineteen-seventies, are among the imaginative wonders of the past half century. (They're the subject of an ongoing retrospective at Metrograph that begins, with the director in attendance, on March 14.) Ottinger brings a combination of giddy fantasy and decorative extravagance to mythical subjects, and revises them with gender-questioning schemas and feminist ideas—as in **"The Image of Dorian Gray in the Yellow Press,"** from 1984 (screening on March 15). Freely adapting Oscar Wilde's novel to modern West Germany, Ottinger casts the supermodel Veruschka, in drag, as the young aesthete and replaces his portraitist with the director Fritz Lang's supervillain, Dr. Mabuse (who is, here, a woman, played by Delphine Seyrig), now a media mogul who, with her tentacular control of newspapers and television, plans to turn Dorian into a celebrity in order to destroy him with fabricated scandals. Blending high culture and pop spectacle with literary and cinematic history, Ottinger fuses the paranoid frenzy of Weimar-era thrillers, the theatrical flair of musicals, and the antic comedy of cartoons into potent political critique.—*Richard Brody*



## TABLES FOR TWO

### Verōnika

281 Park Avenue South

Robin Standefer and Stephen Alesch, the married couple behind the interior-design firm Roman and Williams, met while working on a movie set. This first act seems to have informed their aesthetic at large, but of their many projects in New York—including the French restaurants Le Coucou and La Mercerie—none feels quite as cinematic as Verōnika, the restaurant in the new New York outpost of the Swedish photography museum Fotografiska.

The drama begins at the reservation stage. For access to Verōnika, which is owned and operated by the upmarket restaurateur Stephen Starr, you need not only money (the menu includes imperial beluga caviar for two hundred and fifty-five dollars and lobster for fifty-six) but also connections, or staff, unless you have time to spend what feels like hours pleading with icy reservationists and adding yourself to the wait list.

"*Bonsoir*, Madame," the maître d' said on the night I finally got lucky. *Bonsoir*, indeed. Taper candles cast moody light on elegantly wild floral arrangements and on the stained glass original to the building, a gorgeous Renaissance Revival landmark. Both the bar and the dining room are as immersive as the set of "Sleep No More," liquor bottles rising to the ceiling on a pyramid of bronze-and-glass shelves, brocade armchairs in intimate clusters, creamy pink-marble tables set with filigreed chargers.

On my second visit, a hostess asked if my date and I minded sitting side by side on a velvet banquette. We didn't; all the better for people-watching. Particularly transfixing was our server, whose long, wiry face, pencil mustache, and slightly hunched posture I was certain I'd seen somewhere before—a Buñuel film, perhaps, or a Hirschfeld drawing. (I was so busy studying him that I didn't realize we had agreed to "filtered" water instead of tap until I noticed a six-dollar charge on the bill.)

Despite the provenance of Fotografiska, Verōnika's food is not Swedish, though many dishes come from just across the Baltic Sea. (The restaurant seems to have little to do with the museum, which exhibits mostly contemporary large-scale color photographs, and which sells a notebook printed with the words "If you don't write your story, who will?" in the gift shop.) The menu offers a whimsical mix of fancified Eastern and Central European staples and highly technical archaic French delicacies: borscht, goulash, and "Herring Under a Fur Coat"; soufflé, sole meunière, and chou farci.

All this feels tailor-made for a Wes Anderson world—or for a Russian oligarch. Indeed, if there's a through line, it's embodied by the coulibiac salmon, a Russian dish that was adopted into the French canon by "one of those nineteenth-century guys," the chef Daniel Boulud once told Bill Buford for an article in this magazine, referring to Auguste Escoffier and his peers. "They were all in Russia, hoping to get hired by a tsar."

Coulibiac is confoundingly difficult to make because its component parts—filleted fish, whole eggs, rice, and mushroom duxelles wrapped in nesting-doll layers of spinach and pastry—require wildly different cooking times. Verōnika's iteration hits all its marks; served in visually arresting slices, with a spoonful of champagne sauce and a cascade of trout roe, it's at once ostentatious and comfortingly homey.

The same can be said of the foie-gras poché, for which a lobe is poached and presented in golden consommé, encircled by delicately cut radish, fennel, and carrot. I thought I knew how deeply chickeny a chicken soup could taste; adding goose liver, it turns out, opens up the bottom. But in less than two years foie gras will be illegal in New York. It's hard to imagine that coulibiac will come back into style, or that a restaurant like Verōnika will survive the coming culture wars. It's a place for a last hurrah, for one final Baked Alaska, also known as omelette norvégienne. Its dome of Italian meringue, concealing salsify ice cream atop a disk of spice cake, gets doused in rum and set on fire, a blaze of blue. Watch it flicker, and then fade out. *(Entrées $27-$58.)*

*—Hannah Goldfield*

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THE NEW YORKER

# THE TALK OF THE TOWN

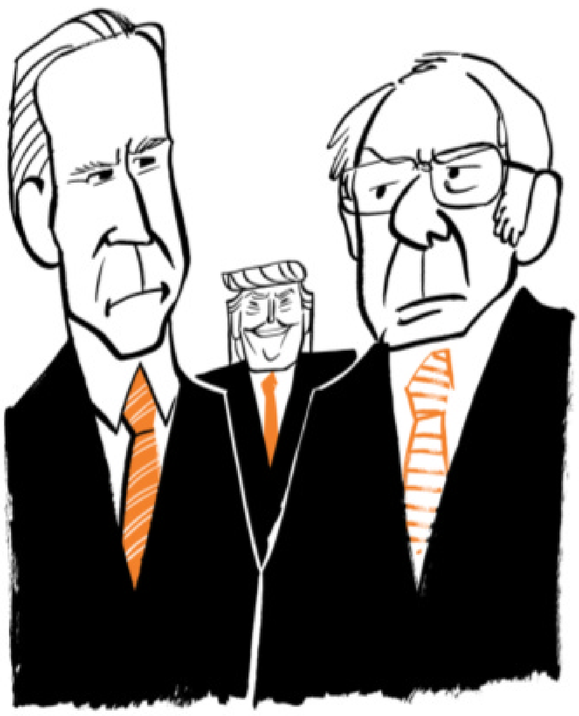
## COMMENT

### THE JOE AND BERNIE SHOW

Donald Trump has been profligate in his attacks on the Democratic candidates for President, but Super Tuesday, with its unexpected string of victories for Joe Biden, pushed him to new heights of incoherence. At a rally in North Carolina, last Monday, he mocked "Sleepy Joe" for referring to "Super Thursday" in a speech. (Biden had, in fact, caught himself mid-word and, with a smile to the crowd, said, "I'm rushing ahead, aren't I?") "You know, maybe he gets in because he's a little more moderate," Trump said. But then he added, "They're going to put him in a home! And other people are going to be running the country—and they'll be super-left radical crazies."

Apart from the usual crudeness of Trump's rhetoric, this picture of Biden as the kindly face of the Red Terror doesn't make much sense. It may turn out to be just an interim line of insult, as Trump, who had been working up crowds with tales of a takeover by the "radical socialist Democrat Party" and "Crazy Bernie," recalibrates to account for the solid presence of Biden. Trump's interpretation will also be news to Senator Sanders and his supporters, who have been portraying Biden as a figurehead of corporate interests. That reading, in turn, critically ignores the role that African-American voters, first in South Carolina and then, on Super Tuesday, throughout the country, played in Biden's resurgence. He won in Alabama and Texas, as well as in Virginia and Massachusetts, where he also had particularly strong support from women.

And yet Sanders's electorate was diverse, too; exit polls indicate that he prevailed among Latinx and Asian-American voters, and, in some states, among black voters under thirty. He also won young voters almost everywhere, though their turnout was lower than the Sanders campaign had hoped. In California, Sanders's share of Latinx voters under thirty was seventy-one per cent. He accomplished all that without the institutional party support that Biden unquestionably has. (Pete Buttigieg reportedly spoke with Barack Obama and Jimmy Carter before endorsing Biden.) On Super Tuesday, both Biden and Sanders showed real strength. Both still have a path to the nomination, in terms of the delegate count, though Sanders's is far steeper. Trump should be scared of them both, which is, no doubt, why he's goading them to attack each other.



Trump spent the morning after Super Tuesday testing different formulations of derision, division, and distrust. He said that Warren, "our modern day Pocahantas," had cost Sanders her home state of Massachusetts by having the gall to compete there—"so selfish!" (Warren dropped out on Thursday.) Trump tweeted that the "Democrat establishment" had come together "and crushed Bernie Sanders, AGAIN!" And, after crowing over the losses suffered by "Mini Mike Bloomberg," who left the race after having won only American Samoa, he added, "Now he will pour money into Sleepy Joe's campaign, hoping to save face. It won't work!"

Trump has a bully's instinct for identifying points of tension. His "AGAIN" tweet was a reference to the 2016 campaign, during which he tried to capitalize on the disquiet of Sanders's supporters in the face of what they saw as the Party leadership's preference for Hillary Clinton. Sanders echoed those complaints on Tuesday night, when he said, "We're not only taking on the corporate establishment, we're taking on the political establishment." He questioned whether anyone with such backing can bring about real change for working families, as if no good could come of moderation.

Still, Biden's supporters, particularly those who are, for want of a better word, established, don't always recognize that significant elements of Sanders's program

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

are far from wild-eyed. He has pushed the Party in positive directions—for example, in the fight for a higher minimum wage. Biden has countered Sanders’s Medicare for All by emphasizing his own support for building on Obamacare with a “public option.” If anything, the outbreak of COVID-19 illustrates the urgent need for some form of universal health care. The winnowing of the field should not be a reason to narrow those aspirations.

Indeed, the debates between Sanders and Biden—the first is scheduled for March 15th—will offer the candidates a chance to make the case for their proposals. (With Biden’s amiable volubility and Sanders’s Brooklynite polemical style, the two of them, both in their late seventies, should put on quite a show.) Beyond policy, when Biden says, as he did last Wednesday, that “character is on the ballot,” and his supporters speak of the former Vice-President, as Representative Jim Clyburn of South Carolina did, as “a real good man,” it’s important to keep in mind that the true contrast, in that respect, is with Trump, not Sanders.

And then there’s the matter of money. Bloomberg, who has now endorsed Biden, has a storied record as a donor to progressive causes. He put something like a half-billion dollars into his own campaign—the amount of money involved is unsettling, even in the name of defeating Trump—and has said that, if he didn’t get the nomination, he would re-deploy his operation in the service of another candidate he liked. He doesn’t seem to like Sanders much; during a debate, he told Sanders that, in effect, democratic socialism is the road to serfdom. Will that message be included in ads that Bloomberg buys for Biden? The race will already be bitter; it would be best to leave the Red-baiting to Trump. Sanders’s divisiveness is a more worthy target than his dreams, which are shared by many Democrats.

There have been unexpected swings in this race. Thirty-two states have yet to vote, and probably about thirty-two thousand more insults, epithets, and lies are still to come from Trump, as he attempts to distort the picture of the candidates and of the country. Senate Republicans are revving up an investigation related to Ukraine and Joe Biden’s son Hunter, too, which Senator Ron Johnson contends will be useful to a “Democratic primary voter.” One hopes that, amid all the distraction, Biden and Sanders and their supporters will still be able to see one another clearly. “What this campaign, I think, is increasingly about is: Which side are you on?” Sanders said on Wednesday. There is an answer both for him and for Biden: Trump is on the other side.

—*Amy Davidson Sorkin*

## SCARE TOWN
### EXPERIENTIAL

Last week was a funny week to choose to be scared—there were so many reasons to be scared involuntarily: a deadly global pandemic, a careening primary season, a careening stock market, a Supreme Court case that could set the clock back decades on reproductive rights, and a President happily stomping all over the machinery of government (including those parts that respond to deadly global pandemics) as if he were Godzilla. So who would make an *effort* to be scared, and—*cough, cough;* sorry, just clearing our throat—in a confined public space, no less?

That was the bar set for a lavish promotional stunt that took place in SoHo. The hype was for “A Quiet Place Part II,” the sequel to John Krasinski’s 2018 horror film, in which mantis-like aliens that can’t see (or apparently smell) but can hear quite well manage to eat most of humanity. Thus the film’s hook: to survive, the characters have to stay quiet, even though the plot has them doing things like stepping on nails and going into labor. The four-day promotion in SoHo was an interactive high-tech riff on the “Quiet Place” premise: participants walked through a series of environments recalling the new movie’s trailer, where they encountered jump-scare sound effects and increasingly loud hazards—a fritzing electrical system, hissing oxygen tanks, and a crying infant (played by a doll). People had to figure out how to hush all the fritzing, hissing, and crying, lest the racket attract the hungry aliens.

Jasen Smith was in charge of the design and construction of what was officially known as the “A Quiet Place Part II” Survival Experience. “Obviously, we can’t really kill people,” he explained, “but we wanted to create that same layer of anxiety and anticipation and awareness of sound” that the films do. In case anyone’s anticipation and anxiety and, say, heart rate got out of control, there were liability waivers to sign. But, on the first day of operation, visitors were enjoying themselves; this was more theme-park attraction than C.I.A. black site. Marc Weinstock, a Paramount marketing executive, hoped that about seven or eight thousand people would go through the Experience, here and at one in L.A. That’s a small number in Hollywood terms, but, you know: influencers, fan engagement, etc. Weinstock said that he expected to be pleased with the return on the studio’s investment, which was less than a million dollars.

The Experience is an example of what’s known as “experiential marketing”—a slick millennial update on the gimmicky, old-school showmanship exemplified by the schlock horror-meister William Castle, who once stocked a theatre lobby with a fake nurse dispensing “nerve-steadying pills.” Smith, who runs his own shop, the Experiential Supply Company, is a leading player in this world. Four days before the “Quiet Place” Experience opened—or “activated,” in marketing lingo—he was supervising a crew putting it together. Smith, who has a genial, ready-for-anything air, got into experiential marketing five years ago, by cold-calling studios and brands with ideas. At the time, the field was mostly limited to building giant props for premières or sending out costumed “street teams” to give away trinkets or samples. Smith broke through with a pitch for a “Mission: Impossible—Rogue Nation” obstacle course, which included an airplane wing that people could run across like they were Tom Cruise.

In SoHo, the “Quiet Place” team was putting finishing touches on the scenic elements in a series of claustrophobic

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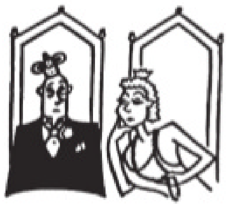
rooms. There was an infectious this-is-gonna-be-great vibe, as if a bunch of kids were setting up a back-yard spookhouse. The attention to detail was impressive. A young woman with a paintbrush, Alyssa Najafi, daubed a chain-link fence with a gunky greenish-brown substance. “I’m grossing the fence up, because in an apocalypse no one is cleaning things,” she said, brightly. She showed a colleague how to weather a stop sign with a jackknife. Backstage, her husband, Sohail Najafi, who owns a company that does lighting and production design, opened a tool case. Inside was a tangle of wiring and circuitry—it resembled a nuclear-bomb detonator from a spy movie—that controlled the Experience’s sound and light cues, as well as “gags” like the hissing oxygen tanks, which were real. Sohail Najafi emphasized that an experiential-marketing experience can’t rely on the “twenty-five-foot rule of theatre,” a reference to an audience’s distance from the stage and a designer’s attendant license for fakery. “People are going to interact with this on a very intimate level,” he said, mentioning the various knobs, dials, and valves with which guests would have to grapple.

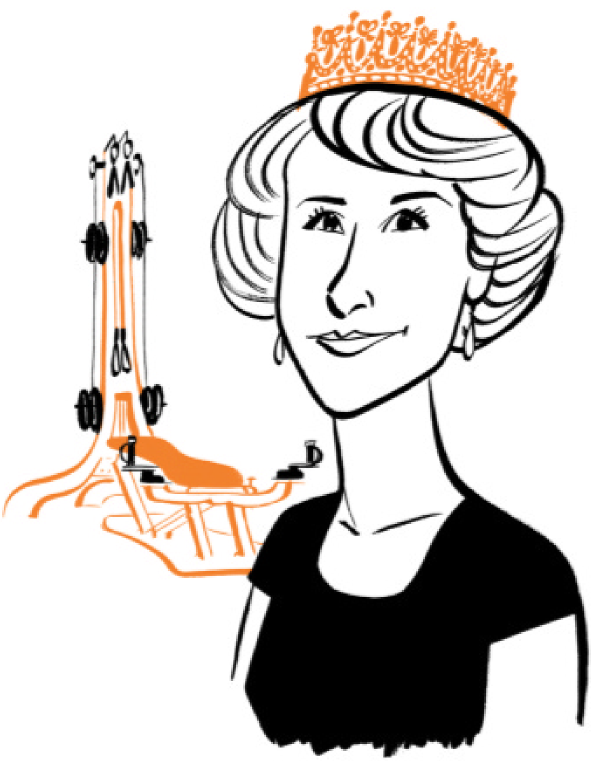
This raised an interesting question that no one was too eager to address. On background, it was explained that the Experience’s many surfaces would be wiped down with disinfectant after every group of three guests had gone through. Purell would be available. But the word “coronavirus” was one more sound that the “A Quiet Place Part II” Survival Experience was hoping would be hushed. There are scares, and then there are scares.

—*Bruce Handy*

## THE BOARDS
## THE PRINCESS WORKOUT



So you’re going to be a princess. *Felicidades!* Now get to work. You have a public to win over, and stuffy new in-laws to impress. There are practical matters, too. After Kate Middleton’s engagement to Prince William, she got busy choosing a wedding gown and presiding over official functions, such as the naming of a lifeboat in North Wales. Meghan Markle had to sort out her immigration forms and convert to the Anglican Church. “The biggest adjustment is not being able to do what you like when you like,” Dickie Arbiter, a former press secretary to Queen Elizabeth II, said recently. “You can’t suddenly decide, Oh, I’m going to go out to the shops.”



*Jeanna de Waal*

The actress Jeanna de Waal is in her princess-preparation phase, as the star of the new Broadway musical “Diana.” De Waal, who is thirty-one, has been working on the role for two years. She spent hours listening to Princess Diana’s interviews on YouTube, to master her posh speech, and read Andrew Morton’s biography “probably ten times,” she said. But the biggest challenge was physical. “I tend to have bad posture,” de Waal, who began her career in the Queen musical “We Will Rock You,” said. (The director Des McAnuff once told her, “Your posture’s holding you back, dear.”) The real Diana attended the Institut Alpin Videmanette, a finishing school in Switzerland. She was five-ten, and de Waal is five-four, so the production designed her special shoes with hidden platforms—which make maintaining her royal bearing even more of a challenge. “When you’re trying to portray a painful moment at home, or nursing a baby, you don’t want people to be, like, ‘She looks like she’s in stripper heels,’” de Waal said.

Last summer, one of the show’s producers, Beth Williams, told her about Gyrotonic, an exercise program that Williams and her husband do three times a week. Originally called Yoga for Dancers, it was created by Juliu Horvath, a Romanian-born dancer who had ruptured his Achilles tendon while performing with the Houston Ballet. He moved to the Virgin Islands and developed his method, living in a mountain hut. Then he opened a practice in Chelsea, at a studio called White Cloud, “which sounds very culty, but it’s not,” an instructor named Abbe Ouziel said. She and de Waal were at a bustling Upper West Side branch, upstairs from a ramen place. Gyrotonic, Ouziel explained, has specialized techniques for golfers, equestrians, and pregnant women. De Waal’s was her first customized princess workout.

Ouziel led her to a contraption called the Cobra, part of the Gyrotonic Expansion System. De Waal, who wore black workout gear that matched her nail polish, straddled the seat. She arched her back and spread her arms in a breaststroke motion, clutching stirrup handles. “Take in a nice big inhale, and on the exhale unwind your spine,” Ouizel said.

“Woo!” de Waal said, feeling dizzy. “So much oxygen to the brain!”

Next, she lay on her back, her feet fastened to a pulley system, and stretched out her legs with frog kicks, scissor formations, and figure eights. “I feel like I’m the producers’ racehorse,” she said. “ ‘She’s massaged and moisturized and she’s ready for the race!’ ” Ouziel rolled out a royal-looking paisley yoga mat, and de Waal put on a pair of platform heels and practiced her stance. “Make sure your shoulders are over your hips,” Ouziel advised, as de Waal yanked on the pulleys. Finally, Ouziel placed a weighted disk on de Waal’s head. “When I take the weight off, you want to keep that sensation of reaching up through the crown of your head,” Ouziel said.

Afterward, de Waal headed to the Longacre Theatre. She was born in Bavaria, to a South African father and a British mother, and moved to Solihull, a town near Birmingham, England, when she was six. Princess Diana died three years later. “I have a memory of being woken up and my grandma being very upset, and it being on the telly all day,” she recalled. At the theatre, she went up to her dressing room and practiced her princess gait in a pair of tan costume heels, trying to look placid. Diana, too,

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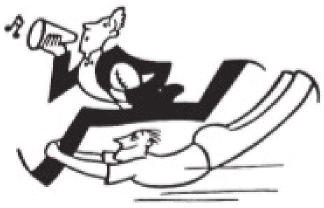
had to make the job look easy under strain. "She's fighting, she's surviving, but she's doing those things with her shoulders completely relaxed, and smiling for the cameras," de Waal said.

Royalty, as Markle discovered, comes with scrutiny, and so does playing the people's princess. "I've got to ask, Why the hell would she want to play Princess Diana?" Arbiter, the former royal aide, said a few days later, on the phone from England. "It's a very brave thing to do. I hope she pulls it off. If she doesn't, she must be prepared."

—*Michael Schulman*

### WIND ON CAPITOL HILL

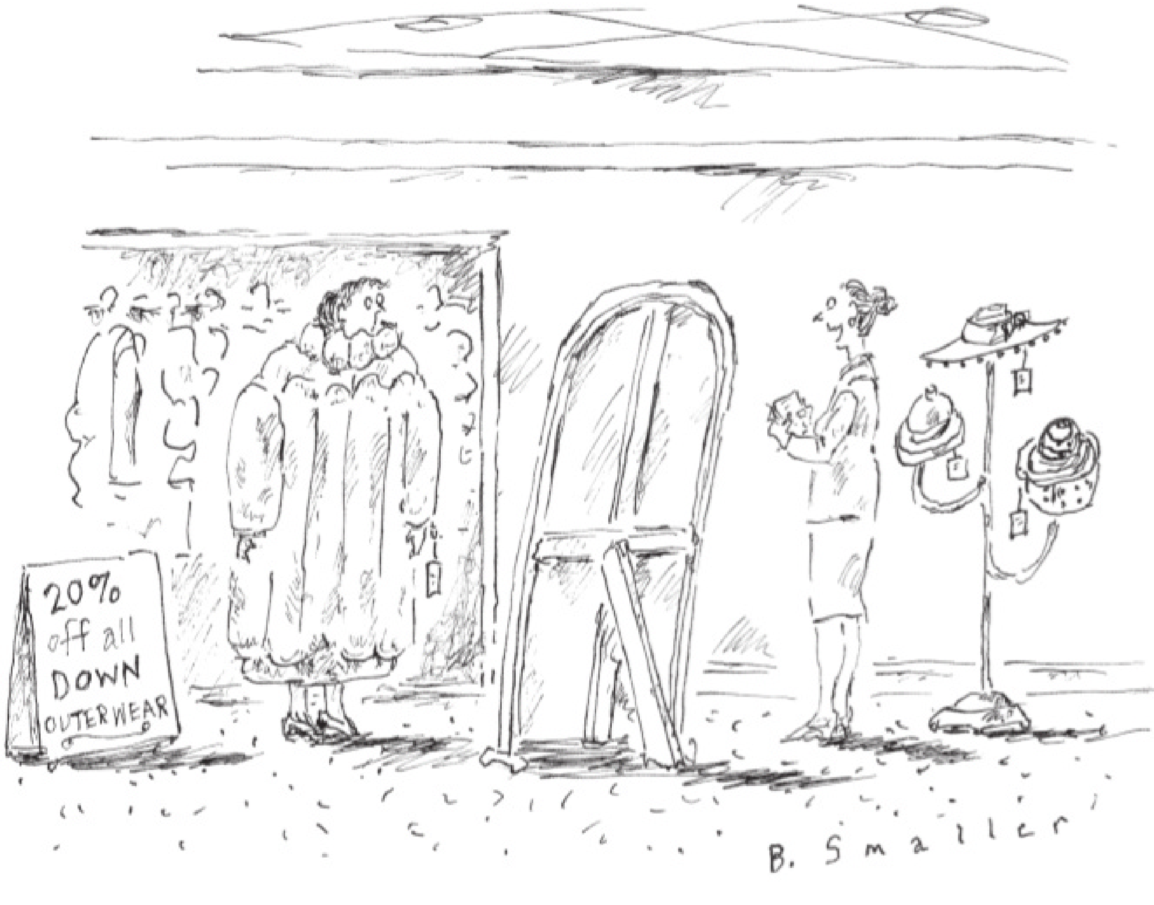
## ROLL TIDE



Tommy Tuberville, who will face Jeff Sessions in a March 31st runoff to be Alabama's Republican nominee for the U.S. Senate, has never held public office, but he did spend ten years as the coach of the Auburn University football team, going head to head with Nick Saban, the legendary coach for the University of Alabama—the Crimson Tide—a team that Tuberville managed to beat six times in a row. Tuberville's campaign literature proposes that politics is a lot like coaching. His first TV ad opened with a clip of him on the field berating a referee (voice-over: "I'm a fighter"). He learned some foreign policy, too, as the coach of Texas Tech, in Lubbock. ("Somebody asked me, 'What's Lubbock look like?' It looked like Iraq.")

His campaign, which employs Sean Spicer as a consultant, has focussed on immigration. Tuberville, a devout Christian who believes that Donald Trump was sent by God, has been telling voters that America's cities are in the grip of terrorists. "Sharia law has taken over," he said recently. "We have more Middle Easterners coming across that border at times than we do people from Latin America." He added, "They're coming over here to tear this country down."

Tuberville likely doesn't know that there's a neighborhood in the Middle East that's often overrun by Alabamians. There, his rival is not Sessions but Saban. On David Street, in the Old City of Jerusalem—a warren bustling with religious-souvenir stores, not far from the Western Wall—is a gift shop run by a Palestinian named Hani Imam. He took it over from his father, twenty years ago. As a young man, Imam spent a decade in the U.S., where he studied business at the University of Alabama. At first, he ran his shop the way his fellow tchotchke merchants ran theirs, but he felt himself pining for the American South, land of open spaces, barbecue, and Southeastern Conference football. Homesick, he put up a few photographs of the Crimson Tide and changed the shop's name to Alabama: The Heart of Dixie. Afterward, he and the other Arab merchants on his street occasionally found their stalls mobbed by tourists from Alabama.



*"The vertical lines are very slimming."*

Sometimes forty of them come at once. "We get a lot of people from Birmingham," Imam said the other day. "But our best customers are from Tuscaloosa. They go crazy." In his shop, wearing an Alabama cap, he said that the new name was initially meant only as a tribute, but he quickly found that there was a market for religious artifacts stamped with Alabama's logo.

He posted a sign outside that announces "Welcome to Bama Country." In the window is a framed, autographed photo of Saban. Inside are the custom items: Crimson Tide shofroth, Crimson Tide arks of the covenant, Crimson Tide menorahs and mezuzahs. Tourists like the coasters stamped with "Shalom Y'all." "Most of the Jewish stuff I sell goes to Christians," he said. "But I ordered some prayer rugs that say 'Alabama.'" The shop is tiny, accommodating only a few customers at a time, and the overflow of waiting Southerners helps the neighboring merchants. Imam has tried to educate and convert the other shopkeepers by showing them highlight reels of the team. "They think it's a bunch of big guys beating the hell out of each other," he said. "But a lot of them claim to be Alabama fans. A lot of my neighbors, whenever they see Americans, they'll say, 'Hey, man, Roll Tide!'"

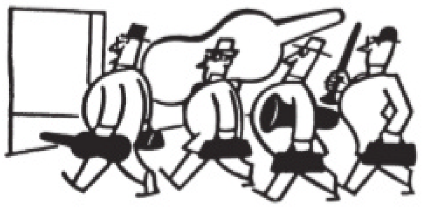
Imam said that he doesn't recognize the Alabama he used to know in Tuberville's political rhetoric. "The people were very, very friendly," he said. "The fact that I was foreign and had a heavy foreign accent, it didn't bother them any. They invited me into their homes and their churches. Of course, the language is totally different. If you speak English, it does not mean you can understand people from Alabama. In the store, I'll say, 'Y'all come back now, ya hear?' Just to get them in the shopping mood."

Imam gave Tuberville points for running a solid program at Auburn. But Tuberville, he thinks, could learn something from the multicultural bonhomie on his street in Jerusalem. "People manage to live together and to respect one another," he said. As for the U.S. elections, Imam feels that the best candidate is sitting on the sidelines. "He's very successful, he's a good human, he's very popular," he said. "He knows how to recruit people, which is very important for a politician. People love winners." The man? "Nick Saban. He is really a genius. He'd definitely be elected. As President! Easy." He considered Saban's platform: "He has a lot of compassion for people that did not have everything in life, poor people, less privileged people. He would definitely be a Democrat."

—*Zach Helfand*

## OLD-IS-NEW DEPT.

## BANDMATES



When Robbie Robertson, the guitarist and principal songwriter for the Band, wrote for the group's three singers—Levon Helm, Rick Danko, and Richard Manuel—he thought of himself as composing "movie songs."

"I was like their director," Robertson, who is seventy-six, said the other day. "I knew each of their instruments, their voices, their playing, so I was casting them to play these characters." He cast Helm as Virgil Caine in "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down"; Danko embodied the man caught in the spotlight in "Stage Fright"; Manuel was seven lives in to his allotted nine in "The Shape I'm In."

Even new, those songs sounded old. Now that the Band's vocalists are dead—the wizardly keyboardist Garth Hudson is the only other surviving member—the characters that Robertson concocted for his bandmates loom even more mythic. One day, Virgil Caine might be all of Levon Helm that listeners will know. But not if Robertson can help it.

He was visiting New York for the première of a documentary about the Band, "Once Were Brothers," based on his 2016 memoir, "Testimony." The film, directed by the twenty-six-year-old Daniel Roher—one of the few non-gray hairs in the audience, at Lincoln Center—counteracts the mythmaking of the songs by introducing viewers to the musicians as they were before fame found them.

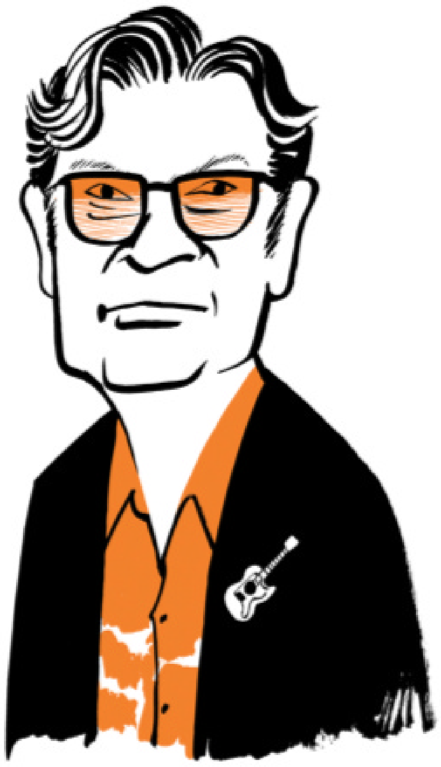
"Once Were Brothers" locates the genius of the Band's music in the early years they spent backing Ronnie Hawkins, the Arkansas-born rockabilly singer. "We played the Chitlin Circuit, we heard incredible gospel music, fantastic mountain music, great blues, and tremendous rock and roll," Robertson said a couple of days after the première, seated on a white leather banquette in the Pleiades bar, in the Surrey hotel on Madison Avenue, as the Rolling Stones played from a speaker overhead. "And then Garth would turn us on to certain classical pieces that were haunting and beautiful."

When the five sat down to make music of their own, facing one another in a circle in the basement of Big Pink, their house in Woodstock, New York, all those influences came out, and the result sounded so unlike anything else being recorded at the time (the late sixties to the mid-seventies) that it birthed a new genre: Americana. "We were just mixing some of this with some of that, and, holy shit, it had an effect," Robertson said. "It sent rumbles around the world."

Drugs and alcohol hit the Band's rhythm section hard: "I would be, like, 'Guys! I don't want to be the guy whining, but we got work to do! And this is getting in the way!'" (Still, as he recalls in "Testimony," he fought to get Helm off cocaine, but then continued to snort it himself.) "My mother was a Mohawk Indian," Robertson went on. "Her and all of her relatives, they would have one drink and change personalities." At the bar, he left his glass of wine unfinished.

Helm, in his book, "This Wheel's on Fire," written seventeen years after the Band played its last concert, in 1976 (Martin Scorsese made "The Last Waltz" about it), portrayed Robertson as a canny operator who saw the opportunity—when the others were addled by substance abuse—to help himself to what should have been their share of the publishing royalties. Robertson said that he felt "awful" about the unfair accusation, which the others didn't support, but he didn't respond publicly. "Levon used to say shit about the booking agent, the manager, the lawyer, the accountant, everybody," Robertson explained. "As Rick Danko said to me, 'That's just Levon.'"

"The Last Waltz" became the first gig in Robertson's second career, scoring films, many of them Scorsese's. Meanwhile, the rest of the Band soldiered on without a lead guitarist. They never broke up. "We just wanted a little breather, and then we would come back together and pull a rabbit out of the hat," Robertson said. The group had even booked a date at a studio. "And I went to the studio and I waited and I waited, and nobody showed up. Everybody just forgot to come back."



*Robbie Robertson*

Manuel hanged himself in 1986; Danko died of heart failure in 1999, at fifty-two; and Helm, who remained in Woodstock and hosted musical nights in his barn, succumbed to cancer in 2012. Robertson visited Helm before he died, but the former drummer was too far gone, already unresponsive.

Robertson is going full steam. "I just had maybe the busiest year of my life," he said. It included the documentary, which he narrates; the score for "The Irishman"; a new album, "Sinematic"; and a fiftieth-anniversary edition of the Band's second album, which includes an unreleased set at the Woodstock festival. He also has five grandkids, who call him Papa Rob. "And I'm just about to sign the papers with Warner Bros. Pictures to make the story of the Band!" he announced. Jez Butterworth, the British playwright and screenwriter, is writing the script. It took fifty years, but Robertson's movie songs are finally coming to the multiplex. Who will play him?

—*John Seabrook*

LETTER FROM FULING

# BROKEN BONDS

*The Peace Corps exits China, ending a cultural tie.*

BY PETER HESSLER

On the morning of January 17th, shortly before I was scheduled to meet with a hundred and forty Peace Corps volunteers in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province, there was an unexpected announcement that the China program was ending. The Peace Corps had first come to the country in 1993, and as a volunteer from the early years I had been asked to speak at an in-service training that the organization was holding in a hotel near where I live. But by the time I arrived nobody was in the mood for nostalgia. The American volunteers, most of whom were in their twenties, looked stunned; some were red-eyed from crying. At the back of the room, more than a dozen Chinese staff members stood with stoic expressions. They had given up some benefits of the Chinese system in order to work for the American agency. From the ceiling, somebody had hung a red propaganda-style banner, which proved that Americans could make their slogans every bit as tone-deaf as the ones in the People's Republic. The banner said "Welcome to IST 2020: Be the Tree You Wish to See in the World."

An American staff member greeted me with a pained look. She said something to the effect that the tree she wished to have seen was a tactful announcement, but Senators Marco Rubio and Rick Scott, of Florida, had declared the closure of the China program on Twitter. "Rubio and Rick Scott wanted to take credit for it," she said angrily.

The Peace Corps has sent more than thirteen hundred volunteers to China, and the agency, which is now active in sixty countries, has always been viewed as removed from political spats. The U.S. had never ended a Peace Corps program because of a diplomatic conflict, but the timing of the decision about China seemed suspicious. The coronavirus had yet to come to widespread attention, and the Senators, who had previously expressed doubts about a Chinese trade deal, tweeted the day after President Trump signed a Phase 1 economic agreement with China.

"For too long, Beijing has fooled organizations such as the World Bank and the World Trade Organization," Rubio wrote. Scott chimed in: "I'm glad the Peace Corps has finally come to its senses and sees Communist China for what it is: the second largest economy in the world and an adversary of the United States."

Chinese hard-liners also celebrated. In *Guanchazhe*, a conservative publication, a columnist named Pan Gongyu published a commentary, "Farewell, Peace Corps in China, We Won't See

和国万岁
世界人民大团

*The author, lower left, with other China 3 volunteers in front of the Forbidden City, in Beijing, in 1996.*

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY THE AUTHOR

You Off." The title echoed "Farewell, Leighton Stuart!," a famous essay that Mao Zedong wrote in August, 1949. That month, the U.S. State Department had issued a white paper that, in more than a thousand tortured pages, tried to explain how America had "lost" China to Mao's revolutionaries: "This is a frank record of an extremely complicated and most unhappy period in the life of a great country to which the United States has long been attached by ties of closest friendship."

In his essay, Mao derided American democracy as "another name for the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie," and he celebrated the departure of John Leighton Stuart, the last U.S. Ambassador to China under the Kuomintang government. For years, the isolationist essay was part of the school curriculum, and many Chinese people recognize the ending: "Leighton Stuart has departed and the White Paper has arrived, very good, very good. Both events are worth celebrating."

In *Guanchazhe*, Pan described the Peace Corps's "ideological and cultural export" as another chapter in American failure: "After twenty-seven years in China, the U.S. diplomatic offices intended to 'raise wolves,' but ended up with a litter of huskies." He concluded, "The Peace Corps has departed and the U.S.-China Trade Agreement is here, very good, very good. Both events are worth celebrating."

In the fall of 1996, the Peace Corps sent me to teach English to college students in Fuling, a remote city on the Yangtze River. I was twenty-seven years old, and I was joined by another volunteer, Adam Meier, who was twenty-two. Not long after we arrived, a student named Richard submitted an essay to my writing class titled "Why Americans Are So Casual." Richard was skinny, shy, and bespectacled. He had grown up in Fuling, and most of his classmates came from the Sichuanese countryside. At the time, China's population was more than seventy per cent rural, and only eight per cent of students went to college. Adam and I were the first Americans to live in Fuling since the Revolution. In his essay, Richard wrote, in English:

> Our foreign language teachers—Peter and Adam—came to teach us this term. It provides a good opportunity of understanding the American way of life. In my opinion, they are more casual than Chinese people. Why do I think so? I'll give you some facts to explain this.

We were part of a Peace Corps cohort known as China 3. The agency's groups have always been numbered, perhaps because it implies a sense of mission. The Peace Corps was founded by President John F. Kennedy, in 1961—the year of Saturn 1 and Sputnik 9. In the same way that the Apollo rockets went up in sequence, each Peace Corps cohort was intended to travel to a distant land, build on the work of its predecessors, then return home. And, just like the rockets, the Peace Corps was a Cold War endeavor. It was inspired by "The Ugly American," a 1958 novel that warned readers that the Soviets were doing a better job of grassroots work in the developing world. The Peace Corps had three goals: to provide useful assistance to "interested countries," to improve understanding of the United States, and to help Americans understand the rest of the world.

By the time I joined, relatively few volunteers were aware of these Cold War roots. Time had moved on, or maybe it had stopped—this was the era of "The End of History and the Last Man," the 1992 book by Francis Fukuyama, who declared the triumph of Western liberal democracy. In 1996, the Peace Corps was sending volunteers to Russia, Poland, Bulgaria, and other former Soviet-bloc states that had supposedly transitioned to democracy. China was the only Communist country that accepted volunteers.

Deng Xiaoping had welcomed the Peace Corps as part of his Reform and Opening strategy, but some Chinese officials weren't convinced that Americans should be working in remote places like Fuling. They referred to the program by a euphemism—Meizhong Youhao Zhiyuanzhe, or "U.S.-China Friendship Volunteers"—because the Chinese translation of "Peace Corps" had been tainted by years of Maoist propaganda. The first three cohorts were small, which made it easier for the government to track us. The curiosity of locals was even more intense. Richard's essay continued:

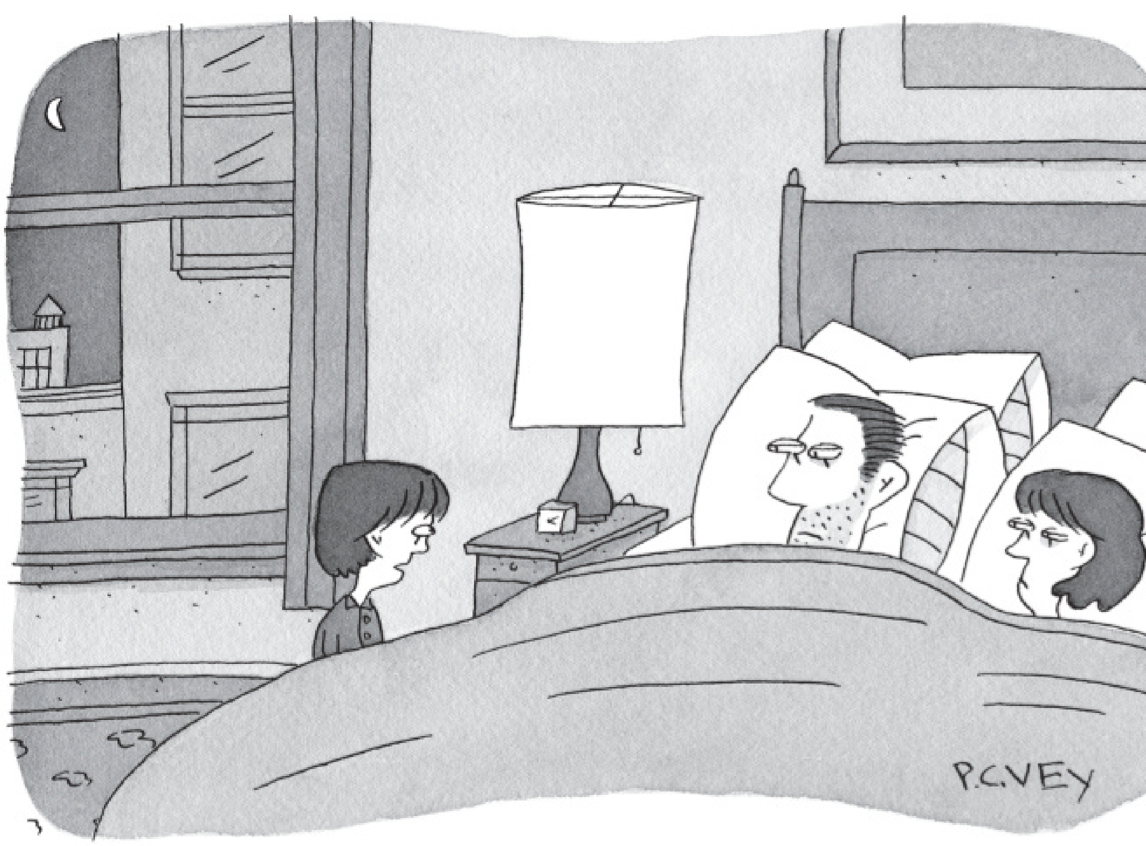
> For example, when Mr. Hessler is having class, he can scratch himself casually without paying attention to what others may say. He dresses up casually, usually with his belt dropping and dangling. But, to tell you the truth, it isn't considered a good manner in China, especially in old people's eyes.

China 3 consisted of fourteen volunteers, and, before joining, none of us had taken a single class in Chinese language, history, politics, or culture. In those days, Peace Corps applicants didn't choose their destinations. All the China 3 volunteers were white, and had almost no experience in the developing world; one, from Mississippi, had never been on an airplane before. The majority came from the Midwest or the South—Adam was from Wisconsin, and I was a Missourian. For many of us, the Peace Corps represented an inexpensive way to go abroad.

Our students were majoring in English, another project of Reform and Opening. China was expanding compulsory English education, which created new demand for instructors; after graduation, our students would be assigned to teach in middle and high schools. But their concept of the outside world remained abstract. They had no Internet access, and the Communist Party published all their texts, including a cultural-studies book called "Survey of Britain and America." A chapter about American history began, naturally enough, with China: "The Indians living in America originated from Asia some 25,000 years ago." After listing some key details about the European discovery of the New World—"it also opened up fresh ground for the rising bourgeoisie"—the text proceeded to the founding of the United States. ("The Constitution of 1787 established the dictatorship of the American bourgeoisie.") A section about contemporary society claimed that nowadays most New Englanders work in factories. ("They are good at making watches and clocks.") There was some useful information about American slang. ("For example, 'draw one' or 'shoot one' means 'pour a cup of coffee.'") Chapter 4 covered "Social Problems":

> Homosexuality is a rather strange social phenomenon that most people can hardly understand. It widely spreads. One reason for this may be the despair in marriage or love affairs.

The chapter concluded by explaining



*"Can you come look under my bed? It seems like a complete waste of storage space."*

the primary cause of homosexuality and other social problems:

> The most important reason is the capitalist system of America. In this capitalist society, although science and technology is highly advanced, some people are suffering from spiritual hollowness. Thus they start to look for things curious and exciting.

In part to keep the students as far as possible from "Survey of Britain and America," Adam and I used whatever we could find as teaching materials. We brought photographs of family to class, and we made copies of articles from American magazines. When we received our absentee ballots for the 1996 Presidential election, Adam and I each gave a lecture on the U.S. political system to a section of senior students. At the end, we took out the ballots, allowed the students to inspect them, and voted.

The students became very quiet when I handed them my ballot. We were in a small, unheated room, packed with more than forty simple wooden desks. One by one, the students examined the piece of paper. By the time I retrieved the ballot and voted for Bill Clinton, the room was so silent, and they were watching with such intensity, that my heart was racing. Not long afterward, a Peace Corps staffer in Chengdu reported that college officials had called and weren't happy about what Adam and I had done. But the college left it at that—such communication was often indirect.

The people who were farthest away seemed the most likely to perceive a threat. Students were thrilled, whereas our Chinese colleagues were curious but guarded. College administrators were warier, but even they were proud to have foreigners on campus. Opponents of the program tended to be at the Chinese provincial or national level.

The American reaction was the opposite. Recently, I talked with William Speidel, a Sinologist who served as the first Peace Corps China director, and he remembered the attitude of State Department officials. "They were overjoyed," he said. "The idea that Peace Corps had a foothold in quote-unquote Communist China was really something."

Speidel commissioned a linguist to design a course in Mandarin, and, in remote places, a hardworking volunteer could gain fluency in only two years, the length of a Peace Corps assignment. Many volunteers had studied pedagogy as undergrads, and often they returned to teach in U.S. classrooms. But there were others whose life paths were radically transformed. They became diplomats, civil servants, businesspeople, or scholars specializing in China. Today, twenty-seven former China volunteers, including Adam, work in the State Department, and there are others at organizations like U.S.A.I.D.

Journalists and writers were also common. Michael Meyer, a China 2 volunteer from Minnesota, went on to write three books about the country. In my cohort, three of us became China correspondents and authors. All told, former volunteers have published at least eleven nonfiction books about China.

I sometimes wondered how the situation looked to Communist intelligence analysts. In 1999, I moved to Beijing while preparing to publish my first book, about my experience in Fuling, and there was a period when I sensed that I was being watched with particular attention. There were strange encounters in my neighborhood, and a couple of former students back in the Fuling region reported being intimidated by security agents who showed up because of their connection with me. In Beijing, at a couple of government-sponsored events, Foreign Ministry officials sought me out with pointed questions: Why did you study English literature if you planned to go to China? Why did you teach in such an undeveloped place?

They clearly worried that teaching had been a cover for intelligence work, and they seemed baffled by the Peace Corps. The organization didn't attract many people from élite backgrounds, and it paid volunteers about a hundred and twenty dollars a month. Speidel's Chinese staff had been assigned to him by the government, so there was no question that some lines of information ran straight to security, along with the likely phone taps. But nobody from Peace Corps headquarters ever told me what I should or should not teach, and staff visited Fuling only twice in two years. At its best, the Peace Corps was an expression of American confidence: if you sent motivated young people to remote places and left them alone, good things were likely to happen.

Recently, I reminisced about the era with somebody from Fuling who is well connected in the Communist Party. He confided that the Fuling volunteers were supposed to be sent to Wanxian, another Yangtze city, whose name was eventually changed to Wanzhou. But officials were concerned that the city was too close to the construction site of the Three Gorges Dam, where Americans might learn sensitive information. So they pushed us a hundred and thirty miles upstream. Of course, I ended up writing about the dam anyway. And, after the Peace Corps finally got into Wanzhou, the organization posted a China 7 volunteer named Jake Hooker there. Despite having no Chinese background, Hooker learned the language to a remarkable level, and he proved that it didn't matter who got sent downriver. In 2008, as a reporter for the *Times*, Hooker won a Pulitzer Prize for exposing how rural Chinese factories were exporting toxic ingredients for use in pharmaceutical products.

In 1998, during my last year as a volunteer, I didn't notice two national developments that later proved to be significant. One was the system of Internet restrictions that became known in English as the Great Firewall. The other was a speech delivered by President Jiang Zemin, at Peking University, on May 4, 1998. Jiang's words were hardly dynamic ("the future of the motherland is infinitely glorious"), but, more than twenty years later, if you say "Project 985," many educated Chinese people recognize the reference to the year and the month of Jiang's speech. The President called for the development of world-class universities, and this endeavor joined Project 211—the Chinese fetish for mission-oriented numerology exceeds even that of the Peace Corps. These programs involved university expansion and improvement, and they reflected a strategy that was hard for Americans to grasp: the idea that education and restriction could proceed in tandem.

During the period that followed, the country's over-all growth was so intense that Peace Corps cohorts could be represented by micro-histories. The year that China 8 arrived, the country joined the World Trade Organization. By China 12, the Three Gorges Dam had been completed. China 14 was the Beijing Olympics. Between China 1 and China 16, the G.D.P. increased more than tenfold. When I taught in Fuling, the college had about two thousand students; by China 10, there were twenty thousand, on a brand-new campus.

In the classroom, even smaller histories showed how the system worked at the lowest level. One of my students, a poor boy who grew up on a farm, where his family planted potatoes, corn, and tobacco, took the English name Mo. Mo's father had a third-grade education and his mother never attended school, but a village schoolteacher inspired Mo, who became the only boy from his class to test into college. In Fuling, he joined the Communist Party, and every summer he returned home to haul sixty-pound sacks of tobacco to market. When some of Mo's classmates started giving themselves English surnames, he asked Adam and me for advice, which was how he became Mo Money. (Another China 3 micro-history was the series of prominent deaths that occurred in the span of six months and that, at least in my mind, are forever connected: Tupac Shakur, Deng Xiaoping, and Biggie Smalls.)

After graduation, Mo Money accepted a teaching job in his rural home town. Among the students was his younger brother. It was the community version of education by the bootstraps: somebody escapes the village to attend college, then returns and pulls up the others. For three years, Mo taught his brother and more than forty classmates, and his brother tested into the Fuling college, too. He entered as China 8 arrived. Of the four children in Mo Money's family, three graduated from college, and all are now middle class.

When this happens at scale across a population of more than a billion, the effects are staggering. Mo currently teaches in a school in Chongqing, and recently I asked him what percentage of his graduating students from last year made it to university. "Every one of them," he said. In terms of national statistics, the college-entrance figure—seven per cent for Mo's year—is now forty-eight per cent.

The Peace Corps China groups started to expand with China 4, which was also the first cohort to include an African-American volunteer. There were significantly more women than men that year, and that became the general

THE MET 150
Breuer

Gerhard Richter
PAINTING AFTER ALL

Through July 5 metmuseum.org #MetRichter

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Gerhard Richter, *Ice* (detail), 1981. Collection of Ruth McLoughlin, Monaco. © Gerhard Richter 2019.

pattern. In 2014, the Peace Corps started allowing applicants to specify which country or region they wanted to work in, and China became a coveted assignment. Yung-Mei Haloski, a China 4 volunteer who later worked in recruitment and placement for the Peace Corps, told me that China was seen as a top priority. "I was always directed that the people who had the most skills should go to China," she said.

By China 17, the Peace Corps was sending between seventy and eighty volunteers per year, and the program had expanded into undeveloped parts of Gansu and Guizhou provinces. But some volunteers went to Sichuanese cities that had become much more connected and sophisticated. Chengdu acquired the nickname Gaydu, because of a relative tolerance for gay culture that would have been unimaginable during the days of "Survey of Britain and America." ("It widely spreads.") With China 21, the Peace Corps sent a same-sex married couple for the first time.

In August, 2018, Jody Olsen, the Peace Corps director appointed by President Trump, came to China to celebrate the program's twenty-fifth anniversary. The Peace Corps hoped to move into even more remote places, and Olsen and Stephen Claborne, the head of the China program, met with officials in Beijing. The Chinese politely rejected the request. "The message was that they were happy with it the way it was," Claborne told me recently.

The Chinese strategy never changed: education and restriction continued in parallel, like opposite lanes of the same highway. Today's citizens are often more tolerant and aware, but the Great Firewall is also more sophisticated than ever. Many topics of civic interest, ranging from the Hong Kong protests to concentration camps that sequester Muslim Uighurs in Xinjiang, are highly censored. Even as the government became more comfortable with the Peace Corps, it restricted other organizations, and a 2017 law made it increasingly difficult for foreign N.G.O.s to operate. If you connect all the micro-histories—each individual improvement in material and educational circumstance—they still don't add up to political change. Mo Money remains a member of the Communist Party.

In 2018, during a visit to Fuling, I happened to run into my first-year student Richard. Like Mo, Richard has prospered as a high-school teacher. During our conversation, he quickly brought up the lecture about absentee ballots. "That made a deep impression," he said. "I've always thought about that."

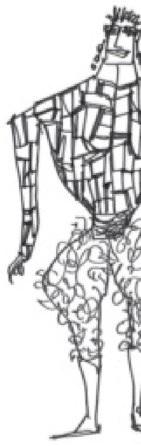
Recently, a couple of other former students also mentioned the incident in positive terms, which surprised me. I had thought of it as a clumsy attempt by two young teachers to deal with a frustrating political environment. Even now, I can't tell exactly what lessons the students took away. I occasionally send survey questions to the people I taught, and in 2017 I asked if China should become a multiparty democracy. Out of thirty respondents, twenty-two said no. "China is going well this way," one former student wrote. Others were more cynical. "We already have one corrupt party, it will be much worse if we have more," one man wrote. Another student remarked, "We have seen America with multi-party, but you have elected the worst president in human's history."

PREVIOUSLY ON... THAT BOOK YOU'VE BEEN READING FOR THREE MONTHS

Rick Scott began demanding an end to Peace Corps China in the summer of 2019. "What the Peace Corps shouldn't be doing is propping up our adversaries with U.S. tax dollars," the Senator said, in a statement. Such criticism had also been made in 2011, by Mike Coffman, a Republican congressman from Colorado. Scott introduced a bill that would cancel programs "in hostile countries, like China," and place the Peace Corps under the oversight of the State Department.

The agency has always functioned independently within the executive branch, in part to prevent programs from being manipulated as direct tools of foreign policy. No other senators signed on to Scott's bill, but he continued to attack the Peace Corps and China. His criticism of both seemed to be recent. Before entering politics, Scott reportedly amassed a fortune of more than two hundred million dollars as an entrepreneur in the health-care industry. In two terms as governor of Florida, from 2011 to 2019, Scott welcomed Chinese investors to the state, and he chaired Enterprise Florida, a pro-business consortium that has offices in Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Beijing. A blind trust held by the Governor included stocks with ties to Chinese companies.

Once Scott entered the Senate, though, he became a vocal opponent of China. In response to the Senator's pressure, Claborne, the head of the China program, received an unusual request from Peace Corps headquarters. Scott wanted to analyze Peace Corps China in business terms, examining the return on investment. "He was looking for things like how many volunteers came back and started businesses and created wealth because of their work in China," Claborne told me.



Claborne worried that somebody with little understanding of the Peace Corps was being allowed to redefine how it should be valued. He also believed that Scott's point that China is now a developed nation was irrelevant. Nothing in the Peace Corps mission statement specifies that partner countries must be poor, and the agency often looks closely at the Human Development Index, which considers a range of factors, including access to education. But the Peace Corps asked Claborne to assemble materials about return on investment, which he assumed were passed on to Scott. The Senator declared himself unsatisfied, and the Peace Corps never responded publicly.

The director, Olsen, had a long history with the agency, including time as a volunteer in Tunisia, in the nineteen-sixties. Some members of the Peace Corps community had feared that the Trump Administration would bring in an outsider to dismantle the agency, so Olsen's appointment was greeted with relief. But, when the China program was attacked, Olsen stayed silent.

The pressure on the Peace Corps was connected to a growing anti-China sentiment. In some ways, it's reminiscent of the era of "Farewell, Leighton Stuart!"—a frustration that China has not followed a path that Americans would prefer. Many China specialists are concerned that the U.S. is overreacting. James Millward, a Georgetown University historian who is a vocal critic of China's treatment of Uighurs, told me that he opposed cutting off the Peace Corps and other forms of engagement. He believes that the Magnitsky Act, which allows the U.S. to sanction human-rights violators, should be applied to Chinese organizations and individuals who are active in the concentration camps. "It's a measure that should be more directly associated with what is going on in Xinjiang, rather than keeping people from teaching English in Chengdu," he said.

But the issue was settled quickly, behind closed doors. In November, the National Security Council held a meeting about Peace Corps China, chaired by Matthew Pottinger, the deputy national-security adviser. Pottinger is a former journalist in Beijing who subsequently joined the Marines, and he is known for his hawkish views on China. A senior official who served on the N.S.C. during the Obama Administration told me that it's unheard of for a deputy-level meeting to be held about a specific volunteer program. Peace Corps China cost $4.2 million in 2018, less than the State Department spent on the International Pacific Halibut Commission. "If you are deputy national-security adviser, you should have much more important issues on your plate," the official said. "Think about what's happening in November. Shouldn't he be meeting on Iran?"

The following month, Olsen submitted a letter to the Office of Management and Budget announcing that Peace Corps China would be closed. Olsen's letter noted that budgetary funds would be freed up for use in other places, mentioning three possible sites that don't currently have volunteers: the Solomon Islands, Vietnam, and Greenland. There has been speculation that these countries were named in order to appeal to various geopolitical interests within the Administration. The Solomon Islands would satisfy those hoping to counter China's influence in the Pacific, and a new program in Vietnam would fulfill the old idea of battling Communism. And Greenland because—well, because Greenland.

The day that the closure was announced, I had dinner with one of the Peace Corps's Chinese staff members. The government no longer assigned people to these positions, and many of the thirty-plus staffers had applied hoping for better relations between China and the United States. They had largely

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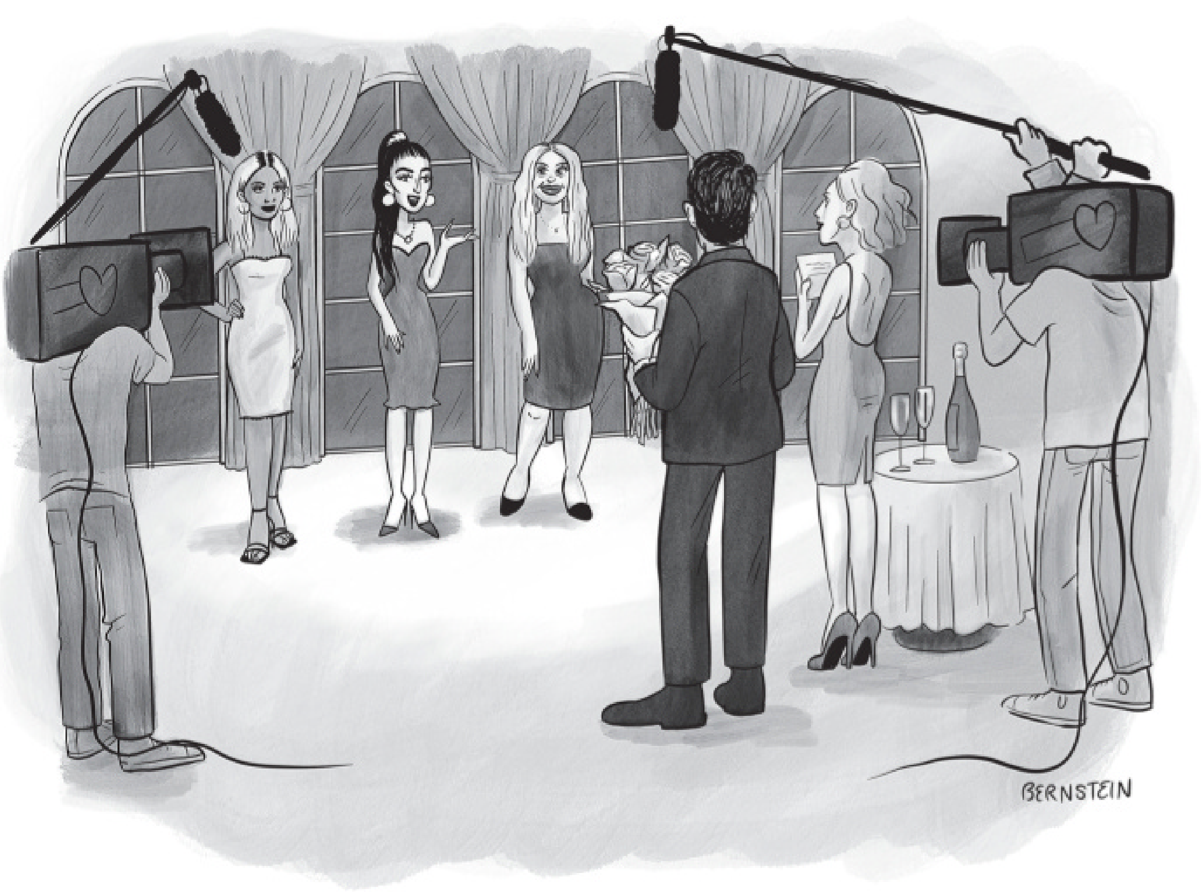

*"These days, it's nearly impossible to meet a hot sociopath the old-fashioned way."*

• •

given up the opportunity for social-security benefits in order to work for the American agency, whose status meant that some staff had difficulty applying for mortgages and credit cards. The woman I dined with asked me not to use her name, because the Peace Corps hadn't yet negotiated severance packages.

The agency had informed staff and volunteers that China would be "graduating"—it was now so developed that it no longer needed Peace Corps teachers. But, the woman asked me, "if that was the case, why were they trying to expand so recently?" She added, "It's like a divorce by one side," noting that the news came less than a week before the lunar New Year holiday. Back in the U.S., the Peace Corps had already invited scores of new volunteers to serve in the next China cohort; now those applicants had to be reassigned. Helen Lowman, a former Peace Corps regional director who organized the graduation of programs in Romania and Bulgaria in the past decade, told me that she had never heard of such an abrupt and chaotic decision to phase out a country. "I probably talked to the host-country government for three years before we actually closed," she said.

After dinner with the staff member, I met some volunteers at a hip bar called Commune. Such Communist chic wasn't part of the Chengdu landscape when I served, although other things remained recognizable as the Peace Corps experience. A couple of volunteers quietly brought their own beer in bags. For China 25, the monthly stipend was less than three hundred dollars.

An African-American woman named Khloe Benton told me that she had been posted to a site in Gansu that had few foreign residents. "It's been hard," she said. "People follow me around, and they say things." But she believed that it was important for locals to meet a person of color. The Peace Corps had told volunteers that they would finish out their terms, and they tried to cheer one another up.

"You know why they lied to us," another woman said, referring to the political pressure. "They didn't have a choice."

Eleven days later, the coronavirus caused the evacuation of all China volunteers. The same thing had happened with SARS, in 2003, but the Peace Corps had returned the following year. This time, the program was finished—the last micro-history belonged to China 25. The volunteers had spent a little more than six months in the country.

One official in the State Department told me there were rumors that the White House had threatened the Peace Corps with budget cuts if it didn't end the China program. When I asked Rick Scott, he said that he didn't know how the Administration had made the decision, although he described his meetings with Jody Olsen and other Peace Corps officials. "I said, 'What I've been told is that the volunteers who are there, they don't coördinate anything with the State Department, they don't promote American values, they don't promote capitalism,'" Scott said. I asked if he had received the materials about return on investment, and whether they included such information as the number of volunteers who became diplomats.

"I asked the Peace Corps about that," Scott said. "They didn't know of one person who had ever gone to the State Department from the Peace Corps."

I said that twenty-seven former China volunteers now work in the State Department, and asked if this knowledge might have changed his mind. "I'd have to get more information," he said, adding that the Peace Corps hadn't been forthcoming. I had no way of checking this, because the Peace Corps and Olsen ignored multiple requests for an interview.

It occurred to me that this would have been a good follow-up lesson to our Fuling lectures about American democracy. In the nineties, we had known that the Chinese could cancel the program at any time. It had seemed a small miracle that local colleges were somehow able to communicate to high-level conservatives that Peace Corps teachers were worth the risk.

Twenty years later, though, the Americans had discussed nothing openly, and Peace Corps administrators must have been either so frightened or so incompetent that they hadn't defended themselves. The ideas that inspired "The Ugly American"—the importance of grassroots and local knowledge—had been abandoned. During our conversation, Scott acknowledged that he and his staff had not spoken with any current or former China volunteers.

The old confidence had also vanished. It seemed part of a larger American trend: every foreign contact was a threat, every exchange was zero-sum. Instead of trusting themselves and their best models, people regressed to the paranoia of those with closed systems. In the *Washington Examiner*, a conservative magazine, Tom Rogan celebrated the end of Peace Corps China. When Rogan mentioned the Chinese Ministry of State Security, he probably had no idea how much he sounded like a ministry hack:

> We must thus ask how many of the more than 1,300 previous volunteers in China may have been recruited by the MSS during their time there. The number is likely very small, but unlikely to be zero. How many of those volunteers then returned home to take up employment in the State Department or another U.S. government agency?

In January, I visited Fuling with my family, and one afternoon we went to the former campus. It had been abandoned after the expanded college opened, up the Yangtze. Last year, developers started tearing down the old campus in order to construct high-rise apartments.

The classroom building was already gone, but my former apartment still stood. The library was also intact, although its doors were chained shut and many windows were broken. In front of the ruined building, a faded red banner proclaimed another tone-deaf slogan:

> Build Nationwide Civilized City and National Hygienic Area
> I Am Aware, I Participate, I Support, I Am Satisfied

While we were there, a man called out my Chinese name. He introduced himself as a former colleague who was also visiting the campus before it was demolished. Suddenly, I recognized him—in the old days, he sometimes came to my apartment late at night to borrow banned books. In front of the shuttered library, he said, "I remember reading about the Cultural Revolution." I asked if the authorities had warned him about associating with the Americans, and he smiled shyly. "It wasn't that direct," he said. "But we were careful."

I hadn't known him or his colleagues as well as I knew our students. In my first book, I mentioned the surreptitious visits from the man and a few others. I described them as "shadowy figures who seemed to be groping for something that couldn't be found in Fuling."

Twenty years later, much remained in the shadows. I didn't know what the teacher had gained from the banned books, or how my students were changed by our classes. But, as time passed, I was impressed by how much people remembered. "We were all poor at that time, we were eager to learn," a student named Andi wrote recently, mentioning some school supplies that Adam had loaned her class. The accumulation of these small moments added up to something larger, but it wasn't a formal accounting. That was a teacher's confidence—confidence in his material, but also confidence in his students. They could make their own decisions about how they applied their lessons.

One evening, I spoke by telephone with Gabriel Exposito, a twenty-two-year-old who was among the last people to receive invitations to Peace Corps China. Exposito grew up in Havana, where one of his school memories involved a visit by a group of Americans. The children were instructed to avoid the foreigners, who made a donation that was spirited away by Communist officials. Exposito's father eventually fled to Florida, where he found work as a nurse. He brought his son over from Cuba at the age of eleven. Exposito graduated cum laude from Florida State University, and when he applied to the Peace Corps he requested China.

"I know what a Communist education is like," Exposito told me. "I was the student who wasn't allowed to ask the hard questions. I saw the foreigners and couldn't interact with them. I wanted to be on the other side of that."

He was shocked to learn by tweet of the China program's closure, and as a Floridian he called the offices of Senators Rubio and Scott to complain. He told staffers, "I agree with you—the Communist Party is a hostile entity. But we are breaking down the image they build of the American people."

He requested a reassignment to a former Communist state, and the Peace Corps offered Mongolia, the Kyrgyz Republic, and Moldova. Exposito chose Moldova. "I thought, This is a former Soviet republic that's next to Ukraine," he said. "It's an area that's often forgotten about." He had started studying Russian, and he hoped to eventually become either a scholar or a diplomat; I wished him the best of luck. He would have been perfect for China 26. ♦

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THE NEW YORKER

PERSONAL HISTORY

# COMMUTING

BY COLIN JOST

My grandfather worked four jobs. He was a fireman, a handyman, a substitute teacher, and a housepainter. With those jobs, he was able to put four children through college. That's where he spent all his money, because he knew that education was the best way to get ahead in life. (This was before Instagram and sex tapes.)

"Protect your brain!" he always told me. "Because it's all you got! Your brain is your ticket to wherever you want to go." (I think he might have been Ms. Frizzle from "The Magic School Bus.")

It was definitely my ticket out of Staten Island, because it got me into a Catholic high school called Regis,[1] which would change the course of the rest of my life. I was extremely lucky to get accepted to Regis, because (a) it's one of the best high schools in the country and (b) it's *free*. For Catholics in New York, Regis is almost like the Watchtower building for Jehovah's Witnesses. Tens of thousands of kids apply for a hundred and twenty spots in each class. To this day, if a Catholic mother hears that I went to Regis, she will grab my face and say, "God bless! What a wonderful place!"

The only catch was that Regis was in Manhattan. So on a good day it took me an hour and a half each way to get there.

I took a bus, then a ferry, then a subway—which, when you type it into Google Maps, looks like you're emigrating from China to San Francisco in the eighteen-forties.

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But no one complained about the commute, because it was a free high school, and we all felt insanely grateful to be there. As my grandfather reminded me, "If you don't want to make the trip, there are plenty of kids who would take your place!" Then he'd say, "By the way, did you hear about the boy who stuck his head out the bus window and hit a telephone pole and his head ripped clean off his body? Protect your brain!"

Initially, my parents were very worried about their overweight, dirty-blond, gap-toothed fourteen-year-old commuting alone into New York City and taking the subway home late at night. (My freshman photo is a real "Come and get it!" to subway pedophiles.) Like many of the kids at Regis, I was book smart and street illiterate. There was a nickname for New York in the nineteen-thirties that I always loved: the Wonder City. And for most of us, coming from the suburbs and suddenly being in the middle of Manhattan with no adult supervision after school ended, New York was a wonder city on every level.

Some of my friends used this freedom to do actual fun things, like taking Ecstasy and sneaking into clubs like the Limelight (a deconsecrated church where you could dance on the altar) or Tunnel (which seemed to get shut down once a month because someone O.D.'d or got stabbed). Police referred to Tunnel as "an open-air drug supermarket." (Which today is just a Walmart.)

I was way too afraid to try drugs, because, again, my brain was all I had! So I enjoyed the nerdier perks of being in Manhattan, like seeing a David Lynch movie that never would have played on Staten Island. Or sneaking into a private club to watch poets pay tribute to Robert Giroux, one of the founders of the publishing house Farrar, Straus & Giroux. You know, crazy teen-age high jinks!

I wasn't always so squeaky clean, though. Occasionally, I would sign out of school under the guise of visiting a nearby museum, but would instead run off to play billiards at a local pool hall, like one of the troubled teens in "The Music Man." Or my friend Milosz and I would go to the Knitting Factory or a performance-art space called ABC No Rio. We'd share a forty of malt liquor and watch a twelve-person band called the World/Inferno Friendship Society perform punk-klezmer songs about Weimar Germany, Paul Robeson, and the Austro-Hungarian actor Peter Lorre. The closest thing we had to that on Staten Island was a waiter who sang "That's *amore!*" And, one time, my friend Pete and I went to an Italian restaurant downtown and ordered "one glass of red wine, please!" And they brought it! One glass of red wine for two out-of-control teens. Then we stumbled home, flying from the wine but also terrified because we thought "The Blair Witch Project" was real and the witch was coming for us next. (Did I mention that we were book smart?)

I got to meet the most intimidating and sophisticated girls in the world. Girls who attended fancy neighboring schools with names like Marymount, Chapin, Spence, and Nightingale—names that just *sounded* rich. We would have high-school dances and somehow persuade them to attend, and I felt like a way chubbier Jay Gatsby faking a cultured air to mask my Staten Island-bootlegger upbringing. (That's still how I feel ninety-five per cent of the time.)

All my friends and I would hang out for hours after school, because no one wanted to go home. The adventure of the city was so much more exciting than

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[1] Regis Philbin was named after my high school but went to Cardinal Hayes High School, which was full of kids who beat the shit out of kids who went to Regis.

ILLUSTRATION BY LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

anything waiting for us in the outer boroughs. It was like a slightly more grown-up version of "The Goonies." Only, our treasure? Was knowledge. And our Sloth? Was a guy on the subway who looked like Sloth. And look at that . . . he's unzipping his pants. "Hey-y-y, you guy-y-y-ys!!!"

The upside of having an hour-and-a-half commute is that you can get a lot of homework done on the way home. (And on the way to school in the morning you can cram for all the tests you didn't study for the night before.) There were also many days when homework and studying were disregarded in favor of extremely juvenile and dangerous behavior. Like doing "dips" on the chain-link ropes between two moving subway cars. Or seeing who could run across all four subway tracks to the platform on the other side without "touching the third rail" and "dying." Or tying your friend's hands to the subway pole and then "pantsing" him so that he was naked and couldn't pull up his pants. And then, if a stranger on the train tried to help him, you'd yell, "He's touching that kid!" Really smart, cool stuff like that.

There were scarier moments, like when a group of older, much stronger teen-agers followed us off the train late one night, jumped us, and broke my friend Pete's nose. Or the time when I was standing on the corner of Houston and Bowery and watched a man step into the street and get hit at full speed by a city bus, and his body basically exploded in front of me. That was very, very disturbing, and I can still close my eyes and picture pieces of him lying on Houston Street. But it's also New York, so fifteen minutes later you just move on with your day.

I was always on edge when I travelled home alone late at night. I was very conscious of never smiling, because I was afraid that if I smiled someone would punch me. I actively tried to look sad, and, in keeping with my living-in-my-head approach to life, I would invent awful things that had happened to me to tell a robber so that he would feel guilty and then not rob me. Like, I expected a robber to say, "I'm so sorry, Colin. I was going to steal your ten dollars, but after hearing that your cat killed your sister I cannot in good conscience take your money. In fact, here's five dollars from me. In memory of your sister, Noxzema."

When the subways weren't empty and scary, they were loud and crowded. I got used to reading and focussing while standing in the hottest, sweatiest corner of the train as a panhandler screamed about Jesus coming back to Earth to send us all to Hell, and would we like to hear a song about that?

It was actually great preparation for "Saturday Night Live," where on any given Saturday someone in the crew is yelling about a technical problem, the musical guest's forty backup dancers are arguing with an actual llama that just took a dump near the craft-service table, while a cast member is crying in a dressing room because his sketch got cut after dress rehearsal. And I'm standing in the middle of all of this with a script for a sketch that airs in fifteen minutes, thinking, *What's a funnier way to say "front butt"*?

And then there was the boat portion of my trip, which is always a funny element to sprinkle into a commute. No one has ever transferred from a city bus to the subway and thought, There should be a boat ride in between! It may sound glamorous to arrive in Manhattan every morning via ship, but it was not.

The Staten Island Ferry is the busiest passenger-only ferry in the world, with twenty-five million riders a year. By my own unofficial calculations, it also holds the record for Most Exposed Public Rest Rooms (they are somehow designed so that any passersby can see the entire bathroom, all of the stalls, and every single drag queen fixing her makeup in the mirror), as well as the record for Most Dead-Eyed Businessmen Staring at the Sea Considering Whether to End It.

Riding the ferry was not a "yacht life style." The bins under the seats were marked "Life Jackets" but should have been marked "A Hundred Rats Live Here." The ferry is known for its amazing views of the Statue of Liberty, but it's also a great place to watch a raccoon eat a passenger's leftover meth. And, look, the raccoon is reading the New York *Post!* Cute!

There are many questions that come to mind while riding the Staten Island Ferry. Questions like "Why does the donut store on the ferry sell twenty-five-ounce cans of Foster's Australian beer?" Or "That Russian woman just threw a stroller off the back of the ferry—is that something I should report?"

In the evening, after the subway and the ferry, getting on the bus on Staten Island to finish my commute felt like a relief. I was almost home, and everyone on the bus seemed to be resigned to a communal defeated silence. It's as if we were all thinking, We live in a place full of cars, yet we're riding a bus. Let us never speak of this to anyone.

The bus snaked its way up Victory Boulevard, which is dedicated to the American triumph in the First World War but also showcases the modern victory of having a Golden Krust Jamaican beef-patty restaurant share office space with an H&R Block. It was the heyday of the Wu-Tang Clan then, and every day my bus passed by an official Wu Wear clothing store.[2] Then one day the store vanished, replaced by a pet shop. But the new owner was either too cheap or too big a fan to take down the giant "W" from the Wu Wear sign, so he kept it and named the store Walking Dogs.

Then we passed my Catholic church, with an enormous banner over the door reading "ABORTION IS MURDER! ALSO, WE'VE ADDED A SPANISH MASS AT 1 P.M.!" And, as the bus crested the hill by Clove Lakes Park, I could look back and see all of Manhattan in the distance. I felt the sense of accomplishment that comes with completing any journey, even a daily commute by land, by sea, and by underground rocket toilet.

Even now I'm always more productive when I'm travelling; I know the journey itself is getting me somewhere, and that frees my mind to be creative. There's a reason it took an American to invent the rocking chair: even when we're sitting still, we like to feel as if we're in motion.

I would get off the bus every night at the edge of a cemetery full of stray dogs that chased me up the street to my house. Eight hours later, I would wake up and do it all over again. ♦

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[2] One of the great joys of my professional life was making a movie with Method Man, who told me he would never leave Staten Island, because it was the only place in America where he could get pulled over and the cops were actually excited to see him.

ANNALS OF TECHNOLOGY

# ADVERSARIAL MAN

*Dressing for the surveillance age.*

BY JOHN SEABROOK

Tom Goldstein, an associate professor of computer science at the University of Maryland, took an "invisibility cloak" from a pile on a chair in his office and pulled it on over his head. To my eye, it looked like a baggy sweatshirt made of glossy polyester, printed with garish colors in formless shapes that, far from turning Goldstein invisible, made him impossible to miss.

It was mid-January. Early that morning, in my search for a suitable outfit to thwart the all-seeing eyes of surveillance machines, I had taken the train from New York City to College Park. As I rode the subway from Brooklyn to Penn Station, and then boarded Amtrak for my trip south, I counted the CCTV cameras; at least twenty-six caught me going and returning. When you come from a small town, as I do, where everyone knows your face, public anonymity—the ability to disappear into a crowd—is one of the great pleasures of city living. As cities become surveillance centers, packed with cameras that always see, public anonymity could vanish. Is there anything fashion can do?

I could have worn a surgical mask on my trip, ostensibly for health reasons; reports of an unexplained pneumonia outbreak in China were making the news, and I'd spotted a woman on the C train in an N95 respirator mask, which had a black, satiny finish. Later, when I spoke to Arun Ross, a computer-vision researcher at Michigan State University, he told me that a surgical mask alone might not block enough of my face's pixels in a digital shot to prevent a face-recognition system from making a match; some algorithms can reconstruct the occluded parts of people's faces. As the coronavirus spread through China, SenseTime, a Chinese A.I. company, claimed to have developed an algorithm that not only can match a surgically masked face with the wearer's un-occluded face but can also use thermal imaging to detect an elevated temperature and discern whether that person is wearing a mask. For my purposes, a full-face covering, like the Guy Fawkes mask made popular by the "V for Vendetta" graphic novels and films, would have done the trick, but I doubt whether Amtrak would have let me on the train. During Occupy Wall Street, New York enforced old anti-mask laws to prevent protesters from wearing them.

Goldstein's invisibility cloak clashed with the leopard-print cell-signal-blocking Faraday pouch, made by Silent Pocket, in which I carried my phone so that my location couldn't be tracked. As a luxury item, the cloak was far from the magnificent Jammer Coat, a prototype of anti-surveillance outerwear that I had slipped on a few weeks earlier, at Coop Himmelb(l)au, an architecture studio in Vienna. The Jammer Coat, a one-of-a-kind, ankle-length garment with a soft finish and flowing sleeves, like an Arabic thawb, is lined with cellular-blocking metallic fabric and covered with patterns that vaguely resemble body parts, which could potentially render personal technology invisible to electronic-object detectors. Swaddled in the cushy coat, I could at least pretend to be the absolute master of my personal information, even if its designers, Wolf and Sophie Prix, wouldn't let me leave the studio in it.

However, the invisibility cloak, while not as runway-ready as some surveillance-wear, did have one great advantage over other fashion items that aim

*Is there anything fashion can do to counter the erosion of public anonymity?*

ILLUSTRATION BY ANA GALVAÑ

to confuse the algorithms that control surveillance systems: the cloak's designer *was* an algorithm.

To put together a Jammer outfit for my style of dressing—something like stealth streetwear—I first needed to understand how machines see. In Maryland, Goldstein told me to step in front of a video camera that projected my live image onto a large flat screen mounted on the wall of his office in the Iribe Center, the university's hub for computer science and engineering. The screen showed me in my winter weeds of dark denim, navy sweater, and black sneakers. My image was being run through an object detector called YOLO (You Only Look Once), a vision system widely employed in robots and in CCTV. I looked at the camera, and that image passed along my optic nerve and into my brain.

On the train trip down to Maryland, I watched trees pass by my window, I glanced at other passengers, and I read my book, all without being aware of the incredibly intricate processing taking place in my brain. Photoreceptors in our retinas capture images, turning light into electrical signals that travel along the optic nerve. The primary visual cortex, in the occipital lobe, at the rear of the head, then sends out these signals—which are conveying things like edges, colors, and motion. As these pass through a series of hierarchical cerebral layers, the brain reassembles them into objects, which are in turn stitched together into complex scenes. Finally, the visual memory system in the prefrontal cortex recognizes them as trees, people, or my book. All of this in about two hundred milliseconds.

Building machines that can process and recognize images as accurately as a human has been, along with teaching machines to read, speak, and write our language, a holy grail of artificial-intelligence research since the early sixties. These machines don't see holistically, either—they see in pixels, the minute grains of light that make up a photographic image. At the dawn of A.I., engineers tried to "handcraft" computer programs to extract the useful information in the pixels that would signal to the machine what kind of object it was looking at. This was often achieved by extracting information about the orientation of edges in an image, because edges appear the same under different lighting conditions. Programmers tried to summarize the content of an image by calculating a small list of numbers, called "features," which describe the orientation of edges, as well as textures, colors, and shapes.

But the pioneers soon encountered a problem. The human brain has a remarkable ability, as it processes an object's components, to save the useful content, while throwing away "nuisance variables," like lighting, shadows, and viewpoint. A.I. researchers couldn't describe exactly what makes a cat recognizable as a cat, let alone code this into a mathematical formula that was unaffected by the infinitely variable conditions and scenes in which a cat might appear. It was impossible to code the cognitive leap that our brains make when we generalize. Somehow, we know it's a cat, even when we catch only a partial glimpse of it, or see one in a cartoon.

Researchers around the world, including those at the University of Maryland, spent decades training machines to see cats among other things, but, until 2010, computer vision, or C.V., still had an error rate of around thirty per cent, roughly six times higher than a typical person's. After 9/11, there was much talk of "smart" CCTV cameras that could recognize faces, but the technology worked only when the images were passport-quality; it failed on faces "in the wild"—that is, out in the real world. Human-level object recognition was thought to be an untouchable problem, somewhere over the scientific horizon.

A revolution was coming, however. Within five years, machines could perform object recognition with not just human but superhuman performance, thanks to deep learning, the now ubiquitous approach to A.I., in which algorithms that process input data learn through multiple trial-and-error cycles. In deep-learning-based computer vision, feature extraction and mapping are done by a neural network, a constellation of artificial neurons. By training a neural net with a large database of images of objects or faces, the algorithm will learn to correctly recognize objects or faces it then encounters. Only in recent years have sufficient digitized data sets and vast cloud-based computing resources been developed to allow this data- and power-thirsty approach to work. Billions of trial-and-error cycles might be required for an algorithm to figure out not only what a cat looks like but what kind of cat it is.

"Computer-vision problems that scientists said wouldn't be overcome in our lifetime were solved in a couple of years," Goldstein had told me when we first met, in New York. He added, "The reason the scientific community is so shocked by these results—they ripple through everything—is that we have this tool that achieves humanlike performance that nobody ever thought we would have. And suddenly not only do we have it but it does things that are way crazier than we could have imagined. It's sort of mind-blowing."

Rama Chellappa, a professor at the University of Maryland who is one of the top researchers in the field, told me, "Let me give you an analogy. Let's assume there are ten major religions in the world. What if, after 2012, everything became one religion? How would that be?" With computer-vision methods, he said, "that's where we are."

Computers can now look for abnormalities in a CT scan as effectively as the best radiologists. Underwater C.V. can autonomously monitor fishery populations, a task that humans do less reliably and more slowly. Heineken uses C.V. to inspect eighty thousand bottles an hour produced by its facility in France—an extremely boring quality-control task previously performed by people. And then there is surveillance tech, like the YOLO detector I was standing in front of now.

No one would mistake me for Brad Pitt, I thought, scrutinizing my image, but no one would mistake me for a cat, either. To YOLO, however, I was merely a collection of pixels. Goldstein patiently led me through YOLO's visual process. The system maps the live digital image of me, measuring the brightness of each pixel. Then the pixels pass through hundreds of layers, known as convolutions, made of artificial neurons, a process that groups neighboring pixels together into edges, then edges into shapes, and so on until eventually you get a person. Nuisance variables—the bane of handcrafted

C.V.—are removed along the way, as pixels are distilled into features that encode my presence. All this happens in about the same amount of time that it takes the brain to recognize an object. Finally, a red outline, called a "bounding box," appeared around me on the live screen, with the label "Person." Boom.

"You're detected," Goldstein said.

Advances in computer vision have occurred so rapidly that local and national privacy policies—what aspects of your face and body should be protected by law from surveillance machines—are lagging far behind A.I.'s technological capabilities, leaving the public vulnerable to a modern panopticon, a total-surveillance society that could be built before we know enough to stop it. Chris Meserole, a foreign-policy fellow at the Brookings Institution who studies China's use of face recognition and other surveillance technologies—widely deployed as part of Xi Jinping's "stability maintenance" drive—told me that policymakers in the States haven't, so far, created governing structures to safeguard citizens. And, he added, "in the U.S., the government hasn't thought to use it yet the way that China has."

Some activists think we've already run out of time. Before travelling to Maryland, I had acquired several ready-to-wear anti-surveillance items from a woman named Kate Bertash, whom I went to see in Los Angeles. She met me in the lobby of my hotel in Venice Beach wearing a black dress printed with license plates. She handed me a black T-shirt, men's large, also covered with license plates. It was a warm winter day in Venice Beach, where Bertash, thirty-three, lives and works. I stepped into the rest room and put on my T-shirt. The dummy plates spelled out words from the Fourth Amendment.

"Welcome to the resistance," Bertash said, when I emerged.

We set off on a stroll down Abbot Kinney Boulevard, the main drag in Venice Beach. The plates on our clothing were designed to trigger automatic license-plate readers. In the U.S., the networks of A.L.P.R.s and databases that exist across the country make up a different kind of surveillance system. First developed in the U.K., in the late seventies, A.L.P.R.s began appearing in U.S. cities in the early two-thousands. The readers use optical character recognition, which captures plate numbers and stores the information, along with the location, date, and time of the recording. Newer systems can also pinpoint where a car is most likely to be found, based on travel patterns. A.L.P.R.s are mounted on street lights, highway overpasses, freeway exits, toll booths, digital speed-limit signs, and the tops of police cars. They are also found in parking garages, schools, and malls. Companies such as PlateSmart Technologies market software to the general public that can turn almost any surveillance camera into an A.L.P.R. The open-source version of a similar software is free.

A.L.P.R.s automatically record all license-plate numbers that come within their view, at a rate of thousands per minute. In newer systems, "hot lists" of "plates of interest" belonging to criminal suspects are widely shared by law-enforcement agencies, including U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Officers are alerted to a location when a plate shows up on a reader connected to the network they're using. There are few privacy restrictions on this data, and it is not secure. Private companies collect and sell it. Police departments obtain data and share it with one another. According to *The Atlantic*, Vigilant Solutions, the industry leader, has a database of at least two billion unique license-plate locations. A recent audit of the Los Angeles Police Department and three other California law-enforcement agencies found that, at the time they were logged, 99.9 per cent of the three hundred and twenty million plate images in the department's database had not been involved in criminal investigations. State Senator Scott Wiener, who requested the audit, told the Los Angeles *Times*, "I am horrified. We believed that there were problems with the ALPR program, but I did not anticipate the scale of the problem—the

*"I think we just have time for one more quick question."*

fact that we have so many law enforcement agencies that are not complying with state law, including LAPD."

Bertash works for the Digital Defense Fund, a nonprofit that provides security and tech support for the abortion-access movement. In a café where we stopped for lunch, she explained that protesters often "stand outside of abortion clinics photographing all day long." She was concerned that an anti-abortion activist with access to A.L.P.R. data could easily figure out where abortion providers and patients live.

Dave Maass, a senior investigator with the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a nonprofit digital-privacy advocate, confirmed Bertash's fears about the insecurity of the data. Bertash wondered what, as an activist, she could do. Maass suggested postering public spaces with paper images of license plates that would feed false data into the system. Bertash had a better idea.

As a part-time gig, Bertash designs and sells novelty fabrics for kids—sheets and towels printed with manatees and kittens, pillows that look like cuts of meat. She started producing mockups of clothing with phony plates, testing them with an open-source A.L.P.R. app that might (or might not) work like those used by law enforcement. Eventually, she got her designs to read into the system as real plates and produced a line of garments and accessories with dummy plates printed on them, which she sells on Adversarialfashion.com.

Bertash's anti-A.L.P.R. clothes are "poison" attacks, which aim to pollute databases with garbage, so that the system as a whole is less reliable. Poison attacks are predicated on collective action. A few people festooned in license plates won't make much difference; a lot of people wearing them might. For that to happen, designers need to make anti-surveillance clothes that you'd want to put on. T-shirts strewn with fake license plates might not be everyone's must-have look for spring.

We spent several hours strolling around. No one asked about our clothes: in Venice Beach, it takes a lot more than a license-plate outfit to stand out as unusual. When a police cruiser with an A.L.P.R. on top passed us on the sidewalk, I tried to feel adversarial. Honestly, I felt kind of sheepish.

Possibly to compensate for the guilt I felt about not being down with the resistance, I ended up buying a license-plate backpack, for $49.95. When I got home, my eleven-year-old daughter, to whom I often feel invisible—not in a good way—actually noticed me. "What's that?" she said, studying the plates. "That's really cool!" Detected at last.

When I told my children, both "Harry Potter" fans, that I was going to check out an invisibility cloak, they were excited. I'd learned of Goldstein's cloak in a scientific paper that he and his students produced about their work. But when I saw Goldstein in his sweatshirt, which featured a foreground of blurry organic shapes in orange, like a display of horribly irradiated vegetables, with dark, vaguely human shapes above, I couldn't imagine Harry or Hermione wizarding with one. The only recognizable shape (to me) was what appeared to be a traffic light just below the neckline. Considered more generously, the pattern loosely evoked Georges Seurat's "A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte," as it might appear at the bottom of a swimming pool painted by David Hockney.

Then Goldstein stepped in front of the camera, and the YOLO detector did a double take. It couldn't see him at all. The computer saw the chair behind him ("Chair," the bounding box was labelled) but not the six-foot-tall, thirty-six-year-old man standing right in front of it—Goldstein Unbound. I, in my supposedly anonymous city duds, was instantly detected and labelled. It was like a conceit from William Gibson's 2010 science-fiction novel, "Zero History," in which a character wears a T-shirt so ugly that CCTV cameras can't see it.

The pattern on the sweatshirt was an "adversarial image"—a kind of deep-learning optical illusion that stopped the algorithm from seeing the person wearing it. Unlike poison attacks, which seek to subvert surveillance systems with bad data, adversarial attacks are images that have been engineered to take advantage of flaws in the way computers see. They are like hacks, but for artificial intelligence. The security vulnerabilities of operating systems and computer networks are widely known, but deep-learning A.I. systems are still new and so complex that scientists don't yet fully understand the kinds of hacks they are vulnerable to.

The phenomenon of adversarial imagery was discovered more or less by accident in 2011, by Christian Szegedy, at Google Research. Szegedy trained a neural net to solve the problem of just how much he could change an image of a ship before the system reclassified the image as an airplane. He discovered that with only a minimal modification of pixels the system reclassified it with a high degree of confidence, even though to the human eye it was still obviously a ship and not an airplane. Students at M.I.T. printed a three-dimensional model of a turtle with a textured shell that fooled Google's object-detection algorithm into classifying the reptile as a rifle. In a 2018 paper, "Robust Physical-World Attacks on Deep Learning Visual Classification," researchers described an experiment in which they "perturbed" a stop sign with a few small decals that to a human look like graffiti but that made an object classifier see the octagonal red sign as a rectangular black-and-white sign that said "Speed Limit 45." It isn't hard to imagine the kind of chaos one of these perturbances could cause in a future world of autonomous cars.

Goldstein's research is ultimately aimed at understanding these vulnerabilities, and making A.I. systems more secure. He explained that he and his student Zuxuan Wu were able to create a pattern that confuses the network using the same trial-and-error methods employed in training the neural network itself. "If you just try random patterns, you will never find an adversarial example," he said. "But if you have access to the system you can find a pattern to exploit it." To make the sweatshirt, they started with a pattern that looked like random static. They loaded an image of people, covered a small part of the image with the pattern, and showed the result to a neural network. An algorithm was used to update the pattern to make the neural net less confident that it was seeing people. This process was repeated using hundreds of thousands of images, until the static slowly morphed and the neural net could no longer see people when the resulting pattern was present in an image.

"I couldn't tell you why this pattern

works," Goldstein said. Researchers can't understand exactly how the machine sees. "These are very complicated systems," he said. "They have weaknesses that occur in the interactions between feature maps and artificial neurons. There are strange and exploitable pathways in these neural networks that probably shouldn't be there."

Adversarial examples demonstrate that deep-learning-based C.V. systems are only as good as their training data, and, because the data sets don't contain all possible images, we can't really trust them. In spite of the gains in accuracy and performance since the switch to deep learning, we still don't understand or control how C.V. systems make decisions. "You train a neural network on inputs that represent the world a certain way," Goldstein said. "And maybe something comes along that's different—a lighting condition the system didn't expect, or clothing it didn't expect. It's important that these systems are robust and don't fail catastrophically when they stumble on something they aren't trained on."

The early work on adversarial attacks was done in the digital realm, using two-dimensional computer-generated images in a simulation. Making a three-dimensional adversarial object that could work in the real world is a lot harder, because shadows and partial views defeat the attack by introducing nuisance variables into the input image. A Belgian team of researchers printed adversarial images on two-dimensional boards, which made them invisible to YOLO when they held the boards in front of them. Scientists at Northeastern University and at the M.I.T.-I.B.M. Watson A.I. Lab created an adversarial design that they printed on a T-shirt. Goldstein and his students came up with a whole line of clothes—hoodies, sweatshirts, T-shirts.

I put on a sweatshirt, which had shapes and colors similar to Goldstein's, but in a slightly different configuration. On stepping in front of the camera, I was undetected, too. I felt strangely weightless.

I asked Goldstein to speculate about why these particular blurry shapes were adversarial. He pointed to the shape that looked sort of like a traffic light on his chest. Perhaps, he said, because there were no human faces above traffic lights in the training data, the algorithm could not see a face that was above one on the sweatshirt.

As long as I stood still, I was an adversarial man. But the luxury of invisibility was fleeting: as soon as I moved, I was detected again. Goldstein's gear works as a proof of concept, but it has a long way to go in the wild.

*"Gross! Can't I sneeze into somebody else's elbow?"*

Like object detection, face recognition improved dramatically in the twenty-tens with the switch to deep learning. Early handcrafted features for faces involved mathematical formulas that expressed how far apart the pupils of the eyes are on a face, for example, or the distance from the bottom of your nose to the top of your lip. But "there are things about your face I don't even know how to write down mathematically," Goldstein told me, "and a neural net will discover and extract this information."

Deep-learning-based face recognition starts with a detector much like YOLO, and can run on top of any CCTV camera's feed. First, an image passes through layers of a neural network that quickly map out the locations of facial features. "Anything with two eyes, a nose, and a mouth is almost always a face at this stage," Goldstein said. Then each face is isolated and passes through a more refined neural network that removes nuisance variables, distilling the face into a short list of unique coördinates—your facial fingerprint, or faceprint. Many systems also outline the eyes, the eyebrows, the nose, the lips, and the mouth, using sixty-eight standard landmark points to identify emotions and gaze. Some sophisticated systems (like Apple's FaceID for the iPhone) use infrared scanners to make three-dimensional face maps. The results are expressed as numerical data—your unique identifier. Unlike the tips of your fingers or your driver's license, your face can be scanned remotely, without your knowledge or consent, and mined for age, gender, emotion, and, if your labelled picture happens to be in the system's database, your identity.

As with all deep-learning systems, the more data you train the algorithm on, the more accurate the model will become. Early face-detection systems developed for military, border-control, and law-enforcement purposes were trained on labelled databases of faces in the form of passport and driver's-license photos, and mug shots—the only large collections of faces that existed before the Internet. But these databases were of little value in trying to match faces captured in challenging light conditions and obscured views. Photos posted to photo-sharing Web sites and social media, on the other hand, are gold.

If the government were to demand pictures of citizens in a variety of poses, against different backdrops, indoors and outdoors, how many Americans would readily comply? But we are already building databases of ourselves, one selfie at a time. Online images of us, our children, and our friends, often helpfully labelled with first names, which we've posted to photo-sharing sites like Flickr, have ended up in data sets used to train face-recognition systems. In at least two cases, face-recognition companies have strong connections to photo-management apps. EverRoll, a photo-management app, became Ever AI (now Paravision), and Orbeus, a face-recognition company that was acquired by Amazon, once offered a consumer photo app. And even when our images are supposedly protected on social-media sites like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, how secure are they?

In January, the *Times* reported that Clearview, a Manhattan-based startup backed by the investor Peter Thiel and co-founded by Richard Schwartz, a former mayoral aide to Rudolph Giuliani, had assembled a database of more than three billion images scraped from social-media sites, and that Clearview's technology was being used by more than six hundred law-enforcement agencies to match faces of suspects or persons of interest with faces in Clearview's database. Google, Twitter, Venmo, and other companies have sent cease-and-desist letters to Clearview. Its co-founder and C.E.O., Hoan Ton-That, an Australian entrepreneur in his early thirties, claims that the company has a First Amendment right to these images. In any case, as Clare Garvie, a senior associate at Georgetown Law's Center on Privacy & Technology, told me, the Clearview database "gives the lie to" the notion that social-media "privacy policies are a safeguard against data collection." (Clearview's entire client list was stolen by hackers last month.)

Some of the data sets that academics used for training early algorithms skewed white and male—actors, politicians, and the academics themselves. Even diverse data sets presented problems: poor contrast in photos with darker skin tones, for example, would make it more difficult to match faces. There are biases built into algorithms, as Joy Buolamwini and Timnit Gebru, of M.I.T., showed in a 2018 report, "Gender Shades": facial-recognition systems in commercial use performed much better on light-skinned males than on dark-skinned females. Women of color are up to thirty-four per cent more likely to be misidentified by the systems than white men, according to their research. Newer collections of faces for training, like I.B.M.'s Diversity in Faces data set, aim to overcome these biases. However, I.B.M.'s effort also proved to be problematic—the company faced backlash from people who found their images in the data set. In face recognition, there is a trade-off between bias and privacy.

Apart from biases in the training databases, it's hard to know how well face-recognition systems actually perform in the real world, in spite of recent gains. Anil Jain, a professor of computer science at Michigan State University who has worked on face recognition for more than thirty years, told me, "Most of the testing on the private venders' products is done in a laboratory environment under controlled settings. In real practice, you're walking around in the streets of New York. It's a cold winter day, you have a scarf around your face, a cap, maybe your coat is pulled up so your chin is partially hidden, the illumination may not be the most favorable, and the camera isn't capturing a frontal view."

The technology's questionable performance doesn't seem to be impeding its ongoing implementation. Though face recognition is only one application of computer vision, it poses a unique threat to civil liberties. The E.U. has tried to make privacy policies to contain it, as have a few states, including Illinois. In China, by contrast, the state has embraced the technology. A 2015 proposal laid out the country's plans for a vast centrally controlled surveillance system using face recognition and other technologies. In addition to making use of China's installed base of more than two hundred million CCTV cameras (the U.S. lags behind, with fewer than a hundred million cameras), the plan, according to Chris Meserole, of the Brookings Institution, involves linking video feeds from smart TVs and mobile devices in rural areas, where CCTV coverage is much lighter. The Chinese A.I. company SenseTime, which last year was valued at more than seven billion dollars, has said that the facial-recognition system it is building will be able to process feeds from up to a hundred thousand CCTV cameras in real time.

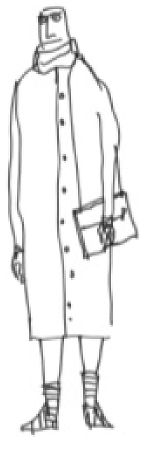
Are China's surveillance-state ambitions technically feasible? Meserole is skeptical. However, he added, "whether they are able to do it in a totally unified way or not is in some ways irrelevant. A huge part of how Chinese authoritarianism works is the uncertainty about whether you are being watched. The technology is incredibly precise, but the way the laws are applied is incredibly arbitrary. You are uncertain if you are being watched, and you are uncertain about what's permissible, and that puts the onus on you as the individual to be really conservative about what you're doing."

I considered adding face camouflage to my adversarial look, and met with Adam Harvey, an American artist based in Berlin, who made a name for himself in the early twenty-tens by creating a series of asymmetric getups that could defeat the Viola-Jones algorithm, which until 2015 was the most widely used object- and face-detection platform. Face-detection algorithms are trained to expect symmetry in faces. When people put on makeup, they are unwittingly helping the systems by accenting some of the landmarks that scanners use to read your faceprint. To fly under the radar, you must deface yourself. Harvey's work showed faces with makeup applied asymmetrically, in a way unlikely to be represented in the systems' training data, therefore making them harder for machines to detect as faces. Fashion-forward types can download symmetry-distorting looks from Harvey’s Web site, though he said that they probably won’t work with newer algorithms.

Harvey, thirty-eight, is slim, pale, and quietly intense. We met in a café in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, where he glanced several times at a CCTV camera mounted high up in a corner of the room. He said, “We don’t really understand what we’re doing when we go outside. We can know the weather, and we dress for it, but if I had known on the way over here that I was going to pass four private surveillance cameras outside houses, or that there was”—he broke off and glanced at the CCTV camera—“would I have dressed for it?”

He went on, “We exist in this world where we are observed by machines. How can you mediate that to appear one way to the machines and another way to people? How can you ride the fine line between appearing avant-garde and appearing invisible?”

Harvey explained that he had moved on from face camouflage because, theoretically, any makeup design that can be used to foil a detection system could be incorporated into the system’s training data. “I realized that, whatever I post on my Web site, people are going to use it to download and test their algorithm on.” This is the paradox of the adversarial man: any attempt to evade the system may only make it stronger, because the machine just keeps learning. And, with deep learning, it keeps learning faster.



Is there any science on what kinds of disguise thwart face recognition? That question has long fascinated Rama Chellappa, Goldstein’s colleague at the University of Maryland. “I’m interested in this because the spymasters do it in real life,” Chellappa told me. “But there was no really scientific evaluation of what works.”

Disguises present the same problem to recognition algorithms as aging does; aging is a kind of natural disguise, he said. Some well-known faces become unrecognizable as they age (Anthony Michael Hall looks nothing like the young actor in those Brat Pack movies), whereas others (like Paul Rudd or Halle Berry, say) don’t appear to age at all. “Aging is hard to train an algorithm on, because it’s person-specific,” Chellappa said.

In 2018, Chellappa and other A.I. researchers, based in India, created the Disguised Face in the Wild competition. “With the advances of deep-learning algorithms, we wanted to evaluate whether the deep-learning methods were robust to disguises,” Chellappa told me. He and his colleagues put together a database of thousands of faces, taken both from movies, like Dana Carvey’s 2002 film, “Master of Disguise,” and from ordinary people’s photos of Halloween and other dress-up events that had been posted on social media.

Teams from around the world were invited to test their face-recognition algorithms by matching disguised faces with their undisguised counterparts. The competition was supported by IARPA, a research organization within the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, which gave a twenty-five-thousand-dollar cash prize to the winning team. In return, IARPA’s face-recognition capabilities had the chance to benefit from the training data the competition generated, making them that much more robust against real-life masters of disguise.

I asked the professor to summarize the research. “What can I wear if I really don’t want to be seen?”

“You can wear a beard, you can shave your head, and that will affect face-recognition algorithms in different ways,” Chellappa said, adding, “I really can’t tell you if you do x, y, and z it will mess up the face recognition. All I can say is, if you do a combination of hat, wig, dark glasses, you can assume the accuracy will go down.” For now, at least.

The top-performing algorithms—the hardest to fool—were designed by the Russian and Taiwanese entrants. The 2019 challenge was sponsored by Facebook and Apple.

So far in the U.S., the deployment of face recognition by public agencies and law enforcement is less advanced than it is in China. Last May, San Francisco banned city agencies from using facial-recognition technologies. In an Op-Ed published in the *Times* in June, titled “How Facial Recognition Makes You Safer,” James O’Neill, a former commissioner of the N.Y.P.D., wrote that in New York City “no one can be arrested on the basis of the computer match alone,” and that human investigators would need to confirm any matches that machines suggest.

Where the U.S. leads the world is in the commercial use of face recognition by private companies. Many major tech companies have deep-learning face-recognition systems and training databases. Facebook’s product, DeepFace, can identify faces in photographs and tag them. Google has FaceNet, as well as an object detector, Cloud Vision. Amazon markets Rekognition, a C.V. platform that has been deployed by police departments and was pitched to ICE for use in border enforcement. Apple makes infrared scans of the faces of users who opt into its FaceID password system; the encrypted data isn’t supposed to leave the user’s phone.

In addition to Big Face, there is a rapidly growing field of startups, part of a market that is expected to be worth nine billion dollars a year by 2022, according to some estimates. The products include face recognition for stores, which can identify repeat shoplifters and troublemakers as soon as they step onto the premises. In a casino, as Richard Smith, the sales director of SAFR, a division of RealNetworks, explained to me, a system can spot unwanted patrons and problem gamblers who are on the casino’s watch list, as well as high rollers whom management wants to court. “Before face recognition, the guards had to remember those people,” Smith said. Some schools have installed similar security systems; college campuses have also begun contemplating their implementation. Taylor Swift has reportedly used face recognition to detect the presence of stalkers at her shows.

Face recognition also offers “smart retail” applications, allowing companies to harvest demographic information from customers’ faces, such as age and gender, and also to track and measure “dwell time”—how long a customer spends in any particular section of the store. “What if you could see what your ad sees?” SAFR asks on the company’s Web site. A video shows a couple having a conversation while data appears on the screen, assigning attention and "sentiment scores" to their faces. Other companies offer face surveillance that alerts stores to shoppers' previous shopping habits, or their V.I.P. status, when they walk in. Face Six, a biometrics company based in Israel and Nevada, markets Churchix, software that is often used to track congregants' attendance at church. As Clare Garvie, of Georgetown Law's privacy center, put it, "Think of a possible application for this technology and chances are good it's being sold."

For marketers, face recognition has the potential to be the ultimate form of targeted advertising. The consumer's face could serve as a kind of license plate that connects the digital world—where your search histories live—to the location data that Google Maps collects from your phone, to the emotions on your face. We're already traced online, and are served ads based on recent searches. Face recognition could follow us around in the real world, alerting the owners and managers of public spaces, such as subway stations and parks, or private spaces, like bars, shops, and stadiums, to our presence. I can opt out of accepting cookies, and disable location settings on my phone, but a face-recognition system doesn't give me any way to opt out, short of defacing myself.

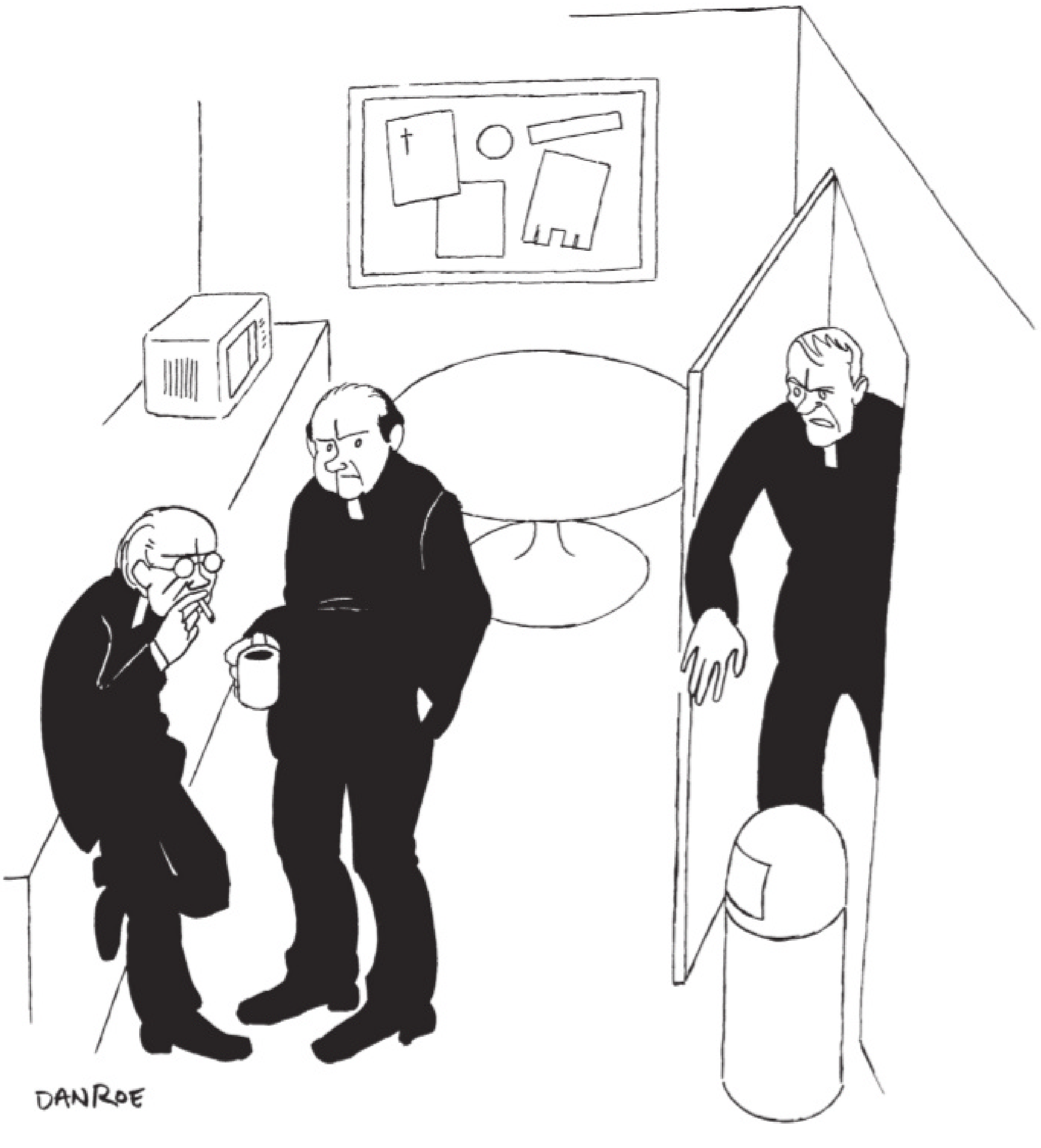
One day last month, I put on a hoodie that I had selected from Goldstein's line of YOLO-busting fashion, hoisted my A.L.P.R.-poisoning backpack (I had my T-shirt on, too, for good measure), grabbed my Faraday pouch, and set off from my home in Brooklyn for downtown Manhattan and *The New Yorker's* offices, in One World Trade Center.

On my face I wore a pair of Reflectacles—sunglasses made by Scott Urban, a custom eyewear-maker in Chicago, that block attempts via infrared light to scan your face. They come in three models—IRPair, Phantom, and Ghost, my style. The lenses contain "infrared absorbents," Urban told me. "This means that on your average security camera using infrared for illumination these lenses turn dark black, whereas regular sunglasses become completely clear." The Ghost model also has frames that reflect both infrared and visible light, which can make your face less readable in photos taken with a phone, especially with a flash. And, unlike Adam Harvey's asymmetrical makeup, Urban's spectacles allow you to remain relatively inconspicuous. "Sure, you can paint yourself up and look like some cyberpunk-type character," he observed. "But you're not going to wear that to work."

Finding a seat on the C, I was alert to any stares my adversarial hoodie might attract from people across the aisle. As I searched their faces, I wondered how long it will be before face-recognition technology, with the power of deep learning behind it, arrives on everyone's phone. You will be able to snap a picture of someone across the subway aisle and run the face through a reverse-image search, such as that offered by Socialcatfish.com, an "online dating investigation" site based in California, which promises to ascertain if one's Tinder hookups are who they claim to be. You could potentially get a name or a social network before you reach your stop. That dystopia could be an app away. As Urban put it, "People are concerned about governments and corporations—well, soon it's going to be people doing all this tracking." Big Brother is us.

My plan was to loiter in the lobby of One World Trade Center, where one can assume that video surveillance is in place—an adversarial man at work. Maybe, if I stood perfectly still, the algorithm wouldn't see me. I recalled a comment made by Anil Jain, of Michigan State, when I asked him what I needed to wear to beat detection algorithms. "You can put tinfoil all over yourself and that will do the job nicely," he said. "It all depends how much of a spectacle of yourself you want to make."

Before I could go undetected, security spotted me. "You need help?" a guard asked. Good question. ♦



*"Back to work, boys. Those mysteries of the Trinity aren't going to grapple with themselves."*

• •

PROFILES

# HOT AND TOXIC

*Can an artist whose power comes from provocation survive a newly sensitive age?*

BY DANA GOODYEAR

In a recent *Frieze* article, the editors, trying to decide on the most important artist of the past decade, tossed around a number of names. The list included O.W.A.s, or Older Women Artists, recognized after years of neglect; it had Njideka Akunyili Crosby, an artist of the African diaspora, and Olafur Eliasson, who heralded the rise of immersive works conducive to selfies. The editors, somewhat reluctantly, also discussed Jordan Wolfson, a thirty-nine-year-old sculptor whose work is emblematic of a chaotic, maddening, fearful time.

Wolfson is best known for the interactive animatronic pieces that he makes in collaboration with a Hollywood creature-effects studio in Glendale, California. His creations are uncanny, mashed-up not-quite-humans, which perform "scenes" and deliver lines that Wolfson writes, often accompanied by a pop-music score. Like memes turned loose from the laboratory of the Internet, they engage with the audience in unsettling ways, delivering contradictory and controversial messages.

"Female Figure," which débuted at David Zwirner's New York gallery in 2014, is a silicone-skinned simulacrum of a woman, besmirched with dirt, in a platinum-blond wig, a white stripper outfit, and a beaky green-black witch mask. After delivering a monologue—"I'm gay / I'd like to be a poet"—spoken by Wolfson, who is straight, the figure, which is transfixed through the diaphragm by a metal pole connected to a mirror, begins to dance. While it vogues and twerks, a tiny camera hidden behind the mask, equipped with facial-recognition software, allows the figure to lock eyes with the spectator and, via the mirror, with itself. Did the piece express misogyny, or a criticism of it? Homophobia? A veiled confession? It was impossible to say for sure; Wolfson's medium is plausible deniability. One *Frieze* editor said, "The politics were all wrong, yet no one could look away."

Wolfson, who moves between New York and Los Angeles, has succeeded in creating event art that people, many of whom don't typically go to galleries, line up to see. An instinct for controversy helps. "Annoyingness is an interesting strategy in art-making," David

*Jordan Wolfson is best known for his interactive animatronic sculptures: uncanny,*

*not-quite-human figures that act out the disorientation and the harshness of the Internet age.*

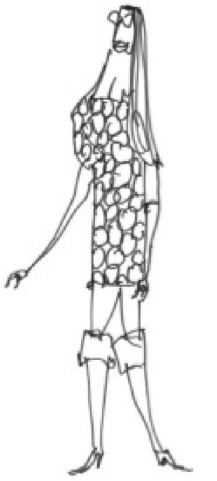
PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY SEAN SPRAGUE

Zwirner told me. "If you're annoyed, you're not indifferent. The work manipulates me, so I'm being triggered. Transgression is key. The only way to know you're succeeding is if people are upset." The outraged responses, he says, are a dimension of the art.

Wolfson's work is owned by cultural institutions and private collections throughout the United States, Europe, and Asia. The Stedelijk Museum, in Amsterdam, presented a two-part Wolfson retrospective in 2016 and 2017; next year, he'll take over the Kunsthaus Bregenz, the most important contemporary-art museum in Austria. Supporters of the work see it as a melancholy commentary on a lonely, mutually enslaved machine future, and a reflection of the caustic cruelty of humans. "There is a feeling of something untethered to aesthetic values such as we know them, things like good taste," the painter David Salle told me. "I feel someone going direct, taking the germ of an idea and running with it in an uncensored way that might only be available to an artist in their youth, where self-criticality hasn't kicked in."

Detractors, of whom there are many, interpret Wolfson's work as a noxious expression of privilege, casually appropriating pain he seems unlikely to have experienced personally. In a field that prides itself on openness to transgression and cheek, he has attracted unusually pointed criticism. "Who Likes Jordan Wolfson?" a recent essayist asked, summing up his artistic formula as "technically virtuosic production + shock + destabilizing juxtaposition + empty, judgment-less vision."

The work is complicated by the matter of Wolfson's personality, which ranges from syrupy, self-absorbed entitlement when he is feeling good to viciousness when he is not, with intermittent considerateness and situational charm. "One could describe Jordan in the most unflattering way possible, and it would be true, but none of it bothers me," Salle said. "You can be an extravagant narcissist and a nice, well-bred young man at the same time." Wolfson's closest friend, an artist named Joey Frank, told me that, in an astrology class he teaches, he lectures on Wolfson as the quintessential Libra. When I asked him what that meant, Frank replied, "How do you drown a Libra? You put a mirror at the bottom of a swimming pool."



Like the Internet, which is Wolfson's greatest source and muse, his work can be both inflammatory and affectless. He refuses to make his intentions clear: pursuing meaning in the work is like stumbling through a mirrored maze. One New York collector told me that he considers Wolfson to be the perfect manifestation of the nastiest impulses of online life. "Like Keith Haring and Kenny Scharf in the eighties embodied street-art culture, that's what he is with Internet trolling," he said. The question, he added, is: "How in control of it is he?"

The first time I met Wolfson, three years ago in May, he asked me to pick him up at Los Angeles International Airport. When I got there and called to arrange a rendezvous, he told me to circle while he went to another terminal. His new girlfriend, Charlotte Day-Reiss, happened to be arriving on a different flight at the same time, and he wanted to plant a love note for her near her gate: a test of proficiency in the thought patterns of Jordan Wolfson.

Wolfson is pale, with dark, tousled hair, and full lips that he pooches out to Zoolander effect. He is both overly familiar and eerily oblivious. Getting in the car, wearing a hot-pink Wolfgang Tillmans T-shirt and a pair of track pants, he immediately apologized for his shoes, high-fashion sneakers covered in fake graffiti which, in the company of a note-taker, embarrassed him. "This is the first time I've ever worn them, and it's a little much," he said. "They'll be good dirty."

He called Day-Reiss to see if she had found the note—she had—and to issue an invitation to join us for lunch, which she declined. "Even me asking my friend to come, if anything, it shows a little character weakness on my part," he said, performing introspection. He promised I could talk to Day-Reiss "if she became important," and asked me to drive him to a vegan restaurant. He mentioned that he has a daily exercise and meditation routine, and, in what would be the first of many times, he told me that I should get a Tesla. Last year, instead of a holiday gift, he asked David Zwirner to offset his annual carbon footprint, and he posted the certificate on Instagram.

In art, though, Wolfson professes disdain for virtue-signalling and political correctness. His hope is to make uncensored work that honors his intuition above all else: whatever pops into his brain, followed by tedious years of sorting out technical and production details with a team of collaborators. On the plane, he had sketched a new animatronic sculpture. "It's been in my head for so long, and I actually fleshed it out on my drawing pad," he said. After lunch, we stood by my car on a busy street, as he flipped through the pages of a black hardcover sketchbook, past notes for a piece involving a biker jacket painted with a swastika, before arriving at a drawing of a box with articulated arms and hands, suspended by a length of chain from a robotic arm used in car manufacturing. He was calling it the Cube, a "body sculpture" that would engage the viewer's physical self.

"Cube can play the floor like an instrument," he said, pounding rat-a-tat-tat on the hood of my car. "Cube can play its own body like an instrument"—he patted his torso. "Cube can caress the floor." He smiled. "Cube can rape the floor," he said, holding my gaze—would I blanch?—as he put both hands down on the hood and mimed sex with my car. (At that moment, a parent from my kids' school happened by, and shot me a perplexed look.) "Cube can beat the floor, right? Cube can be lifted up and spun and do, like, jazz hands." His hands jittered excitedly as his face curled into a joker's smile. "No, I'm serious, wouldn't that be fabulous?"

For the nearly three years since that meeting, the Trump years, Wolfson has been in Glendale, working on the Cube, as the divisions and inequities and hypocrisies in American culture have become contested territory in the arts. The Internet offers an endless variety of images, from cats to beheadings, but Wolfson is making his work in an increasingly constrained cultural environment. Among younger audiences, there is a sense that art should serve as a moral guide, upholding decency in a world run amok. Arguments about a given artist's right to material have become central to a work's reception, and, in some cases, to its ability to exist. There have been protests, cancellations, anguished editorials. Canonical Western art works like Balthus's schoolgirls and Gauguin's Tahitian teen-agers are being reassessed and demoted.

With cancel culture in full swing, Wolfson seems like an obvious candidate. He managed his career skillfully in the twenty-tens, emerging with a reputation as an exciting (if irritating) provocateur; still, I wondered if he could survive the shifting sensitivities of the new era. "It's a contemporary version of the Gauguin question, where we're judgmental of the person's behavior, but the person's behavior is what generates and is inseparable from the subject of some great art," the New York collector said. The idea of the artist as trickster and provocateur has a long history. But, with Trump providing what one artist called "a more interesting Jordan Wolfson in the news cycle," perhaps the art world is tiring of the trope. Wolfson's uncanny knack for spectacle might prevent his demise, but it could just as easily cause it.

In much of his work, which includes video, animation, wall pieces, and sculpture, Wolfson positions himself as a kind of sexy deviant; often, he creates alter egos—mischievous, nasty red-haired boys who dance in front of mirrors and vivisect themselves and pop zits and belittle women and speak with the artist's bedroom voice. "People say my work is really dark," he told me. "There's nothing off-limits, no censorship, no *bad*." He went on, "There were a lot of people, even in the art world, who said to me, 'You better watch yourself. The art world is policed.'" He paused and batted his lashes thoughtfully, then resumed in a kittenish tone: "When you're having ideas and then you're being told they're bad and then you're having an inner censor telling you your ideas are bad, that's no way to live. You're a prisoner."

Wolfson's most uncensored, and most troublesome, performance may be himself. "He turns other humans into a prop for his dominance and forced intimacy," the collector told me. Stefan Kalmár, the director of the Institute of Contemporary Arts, in London, says that he once went to Wolfson's apartment to conduct an interview, and the artist met him at the door in a T-shirt, boxer shorts, and one tube sock. "For two days, I was his shrink," Kalmár told me. "I couldn't put the bucket under his brain as quickly as he was leaking. Then he took a picture of me from the Internet and created a false Grindr profile with me as a German Nazi."

For years, if Wolfson was not screaming in someone's face, he was whispering, hot and toxic, in their ear. He would park in the handicapped spot, hit on your girlfriend, assail you with arguments for why your gallery should show his work. He affronted men and offended women. "It's to extend his brand of Edgelord Art," an artist who knows him well told me. "It's almost laughably banal—another rich white person exercising their place in the world to do better at the expense of other people's health. It's by-the-book sociopathy. Sociopaths are people who regard people as objects."

In 2012, Wolfson showed "Raspberry Poser," a video in which he stars as a skinhead. Scenes of Wolfson lying down in a park outside Paris, bare bottom up, are intercut with sequences depicting a C.G.I. cartoon of the AIDS virus bopping through SoHo, into

*"Sorry I'm late—I was stuck in the subway for twenty years."*

high-end design stores selling children's furniture and expensive bathroom appliances. By one reading, the piece provides a devastating brief history of the disappearance of an artists' community and the consumer temples that rose from its ashes. By another, it provides a tour of the neighborhood in which Wolfson aspired to live, and where he rented a top-floor loft in the summer of 2017. When I visited him there, he took me to a bathroom store similar to the one featured in the video, so he could price fixtures for the guest room of a hundred-acre farm he owns upstate. He left with a tear sheet for a two-thousand-dollar black toilet, whispering, in a campy New York accent that he said was a put-on of his mom, "Don't put the nice toilet paper in the guest bathroom."

Wolfson grew up on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. His mother, Patricia Burrows, is a psychoanalyst; during the eighties, she counselled numerous AIDS patients. His father, Milt Wolfson, who has a theatrical-fabric supply business, also knew people afflicted by the disease. "Me making an art work with the AIDS virus doesn't mean I like AIDS or think the AIDS virus is funny," Wolfson told me. "It terrifies me. There were constantly homeless people you would see dying on the street of AIDS. There was my father's best friend who died of AIDS. This was omnipresent in my life. My mother was coming home crying every night." Another time, he said, "Gay people don't own AIDS. When we witness suffering, we experience it by proxy."

As a child, Wolfson struggled with dyslexia and attention-deficit disorder. In Manhattan, attending Columbia Grammar & Preparatory School—where, he told me, Barron Trump was a student—he felt special. When he was ten, his parents decided to move to their weekend house, in Fairfield County, and they sent him and his older sister to public school. "We moved to Connecticut, and I was disabled and I was, like, Jewish," he says. Discovering that he could paint was his first experience of fluency, a promise of liberation from a feared future working in a video shop.

The Burrows side of the family was wealthy and cultured. In the early nineteen-hundreds, Patricia's grandfather, an immigrant from Hungary who never learned to read English, founded a large linen-supply company that laundered towels and sheets for hotels; her parents collected art by Milton Avery, George Grosz, and Ben Shahn; Larry Rivers taught her mother to paint in the basement of the house on Long Island where she lived. In describing his family, Wolfson emphasized the reverence for art and artists. His mother's brother, he told me the first time we met, is married to the writer Erica Jong. Becoming an artist wasn't an act of rebellion; it was a way to secure his parents' approval.

At Wolfson's graduation from the Rhode Island School of Design, in 2003, his parents approached his favorite teacher, Mark Milloff. "They said, 'We have money to send him to grad school, or he can go to Berlin,'" Milloff recalled. "They wanted to know, 'Can he make it?' I said there was no chance Jordan wasn't going to succeed." Wolfson moved to Berlin with his girlfriend. "She was RoseLee Goldberg's daughter and Klaus Biesenbach's assistant," he told me. (Goldberg is a foundational figure in performance art. Biesenbach, a German curator, recently became the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art, in Los Angeles.)

"I was psychotically serious about art, embarrassingly serious," Wolfson says. In 2006, three years out of art school, he was included in the Whitney Biennial, along with Dash Snow and Dan Colen, close friends and collaborators whose expression of hedonistic downtown life formed the dominant aesthetic of the young New York art scene. "Jordan was between girlfriends," Joey Frank says. "I went as his date to a lot of dinners. We saw Dan Colen and Dash Snow, and I remember Jordan being, like, 'Those are the cool kids. We're not going to say hi.'"

For the Biennial, Wolfson contributed a modest work, based on a film called "The Perfect Human," by Jørgen Leth. Shot in black-and-white, Wolfson's piece featured a sign-language actor, shown from the bow tie down, silently delivering Charlie Chaplin's final speech from "The Great Dictator." Polite self-containment ended with the title; Wolfson named the piece with the full text of Chaplin's speech, nearly seven hundred words to forever flummox the catalogue department of any institution that might acquire the work. Thinking about this gesture, I keep returning to a nature-documentary image of an ant in the rain forest, overtaken by a parasitic fungus that bursts through its head in order to disperse spores. Wolfson was emerging.

"I still have a shitty reputation because of my twenties, because I behaved so badly," Wolfson told me. "I was arrogant, I was rude, I was pushy with art dealers and competitive with other artists. I would say mean things, terrible. I was one of those—I hate to say it, but I was one of those guys, one of those people, really a problem. People thought I was a shit, a brat." He forgives himself: he was suffering, plagued by career anxiety. He says, "I was not a relaxed young person. I would always hear, 'You're difficult! You're difficult! So-and-So says you're difficult, they're not going to want to show you.' I was difficult because I was in pain."

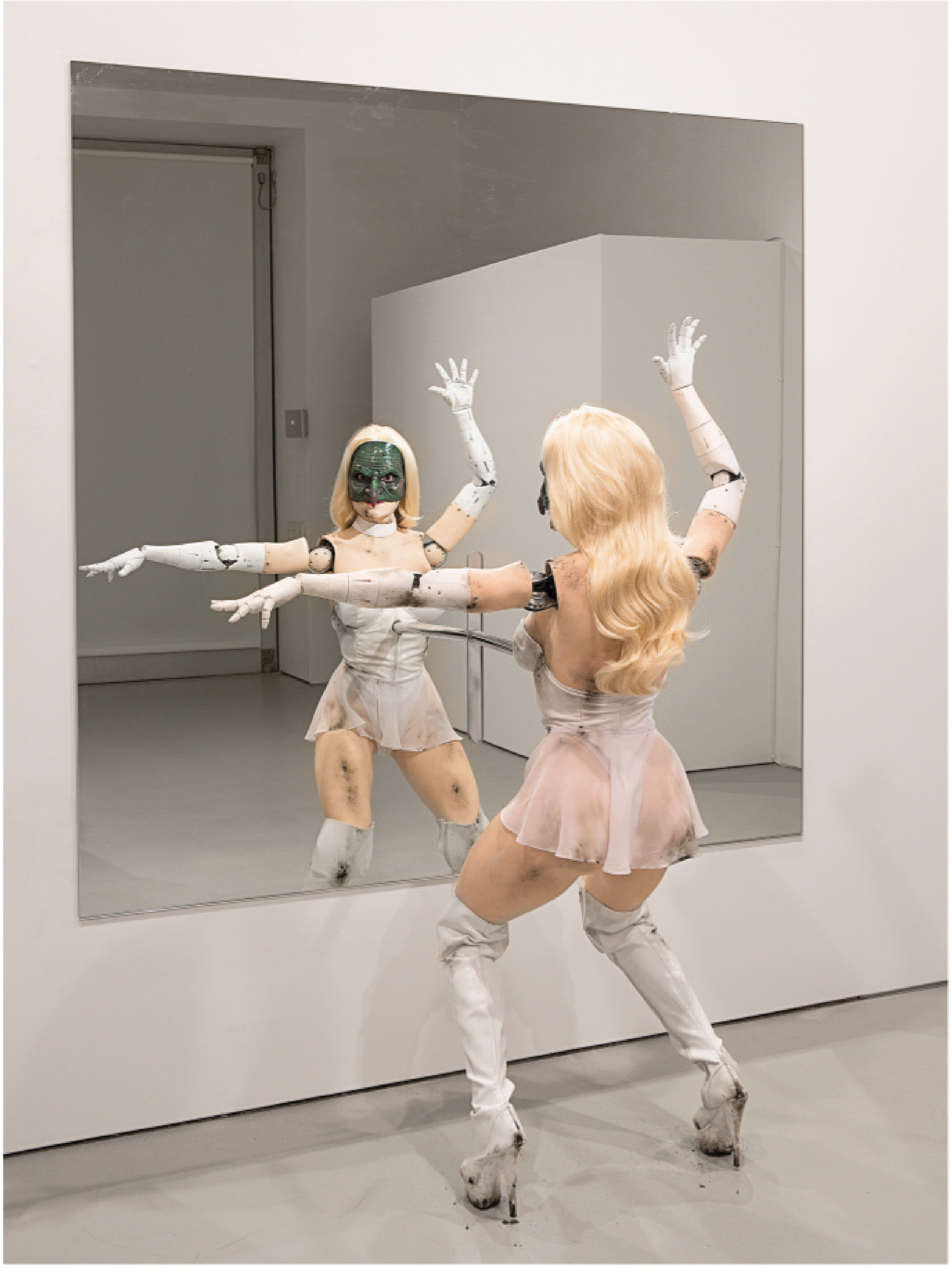
After a period of confusion, Wolfson renounced safe conceptual art, deciding that his unhappiness stemmed from repressing his true artistic impulses. He searched the Internet for animators who could help him bring to life the images in his head. Brooke Garber Neidich, a trustee of the Whitney Museum, provided funding for him. Although she owns an early conceptual piece, she had no desire to buy any of the new video work; it was too disturbing for her taste. She says, "I give him that motherly 'Sweetie, maybe you want to talk to somebody about this?'"

Alex Zachary, a gallerist in New York at the time, remembers meeting Wolfson on the art circuit. "He was at once sociable and antisocial," Zachary said. Wolfson asked if he would show a video piece he had been working on. "Like many people in the face of Jordan, I ended up doing and saying things I didn't fully plan to," Zachary told me. Wolfson insisted that he buy an eighty-inch monitor and carpet the gallery wall-to-wall, so that viewers could sit down on the floor to watch. The gallery hosted a large dinner at the Ukrainian Institute after the opening. "I'm sure the dinner cost as much as we sold the art work for," Zachary said. (He now works in finance, where, he says, the people are nicer.)

The piece, "Animation, masks," is an animation of a Shylock character flipping through the pages of French *Vogue*. It begins with the character mouthing both sides of an intimate dialogue voiced by Wolfson and a woman. "Will you tell them how I am?" Wolfson asks. "Well, your cock's a lot bigger than you say it is," the woman replies. "And you're a very playful lover." The character, which Wolfson generated from images he found by searching "evil Jew" on Google, has tufts of wiry black receding hair escaping from underneath a yarmulke. The nose, a beaky precursor to the mask worn by "Female Figure," turns cartoonishly phallic when he recites Richard Brautigan's kiss-off ode "Love Poem." Wolfson's parents were worried. "One, they thought it was anti-Semitic. Two, they thought I was going to ruin my art career," he told me. "But they don't know anything."

Zachary told me that he had intended to review "Animation, masks" before we talked, but couldn't bear to. "It's such a painful, cringe-inducing piece to watch, less for the Jewish content and more for the Jordan content," he said. His indelible impression of exhibiting the work, other than mortification, is something that Wolfson told him as they were planning the show: "He said, 'We won't be punished for this.'"

Wolfson's instinct proved correct. In the *Times*, Roberta Smith praised the video's "intellectual density" and "visual power," its "balance of seduction and subversion," writing that it had "the hallmarks of a classic." Sadie Coles, a prominent gallerist in London, took Wolfson on the following year. "He always says he was my rescue dog," Coles told me. "He did seem very puppyish. He wanted to find a home." Soon afterward, David Zwirner saw a video piece by Wolfson at Coles's gallery and invited him to show some of his work. Wolfson began referring to the two dealers as his mom and dad. He was the kid who always asked for more.



*"Female Figure," from 2014, vogues, twerks, and makes eye contact with viewers.*

© JORDAN WOLFSON. COURTESY THE ARTIST, DAVID ZWIRNER, AND SADIE COLES HQ

Zwirner, planning a group show, told Wolfson that he could participate if he didn't mind taking his work down early, to make way for the next exhibition on the schedule. Wolfson indicated that he wasn't really interested in that. "It devolved," Zwirner told me. "I think he was playing me. He knew if he pushed me a little harder I'd give him a proper show. But first he came to me with the idea for 'Female Figure'—for which he needed half a million bucks. We had never done a show together!" Zwirner was taken with Wolfson's enthusiasm. "He's a beautiful salesman," he said. "He can really present his work, he acts it out, he has a great physicality. But could he make it?" "Female Figure" was unveiled ten days late. Zwirner said, "From that moment on, it was a total sensation." Wolfson insisted that no more than four people at a time be allowed to view the sculpture, and the gallery, like a takeout restaurant with a tiny front room, soon had a line down the block—a form of promotion that money can't buy. Zwirner created an online reservation system to meet demand.

"Galleries—they're Seymour, you're the Venus flytrap," Wolfson told me. He was referring to the plot of "Little Shop of Horrors," in which a sad sack discovers a mutant plant and helps it bloom into a human-eating monster. "But you could also say the artist is Seymour *and* the Venus flytrap. Or the art work is the Venus flytrap."

In May of 2014, a month after "Female Figure" came down, Wolfson posted on Instagram, "I'm at the gym listening to Cat Stevens and I'm feeling emotion and weird. I don't even really like him but maybe it is good. A work of mine just went for 100k at auction. I think it's lame and boring. I didn't start as an artist to make cash or grow cash. I've been showing since I was 21 and now I'm 33. This is the first year that I've made real money and to be honest it doesn't mean anything to me. I just love art and making art. So don't be a poser."

One day in Brooklyn, Wolfson had lunch with Joey Frank. Wolfson gave him a present, a T-shirt printed with a meme-y palindrome, "Taco Cat spelled backwards is Taco Cat," which Frank seemed genuinely excited about. Wolfson considered the menu—smoked trout, or caramelized fennel?—before settling on an austere scant-oil omelette and dry lettuce leaves. They gossiped briefly about an angry screed that another friend of Frank's had posted about Frank's girlfriend.

"Your work," Frank said. "It's about angry outbursts." A semiotics student at Brown when Wolfson was studying sculpture at RISD, he is Wolfson's most loyal interpreter.

Wolfson smiled. "Not really, no," he said.

"Isn't your most recent piece, 'Real Violence,' about that?"

"It isn't *about* anything."

In "Real Violence," a virtual-reality piece, Wolfson beats an animatronic dummy with a baseball bat until its face is obliterated by computer-generated blood, to the incantation of the Hanukkah blessings. The dummy, with red hair and pale skin, looks convincingly human. When the piece was shown in the 2017 Whitney Biennial, critics declared it assaultive, sadistic, "borderline insane." As with "Female Figure," the dummy makes eye contact with the viewer, but this time the viewer can, by turning her head in the headset, decide to look away. "His work is self-psychoanalysis, looking at the building blocks of what self is," Adam Weinberg, the director of the Whitney, told me. "The violence is a metaphor for tearing himself down psychologically."

Following the Biennial, Wolfson was besieged by critics and spectators demanding that he take responsibility for what he presents. In a Q.&A. at the New Museum, Aria Dean, a black female curator who had organized a screening of some of Wolfson's videos, asked what he intended by making a work showing a white man—the artist—brutalizing a simulacrum of another white man. "I've never really thought of, specifically, white-on-white violence," he said. When a member of the audience referred to the privileged viewpoint from which the piece seemed to emanate, Wolfson appeared lost. "What privilege?" he asked.

At lunch in Brooklyn, Frank tried again: was he sure some of the work wasn't about anger?

"You're letting the pimple define the body," Wolfson said. He paused, and added, contemplatively, "I haven't had a pimple for a long time."

"Have you ever traded art work to a dermatologist?" Frank asked.

"Actually, I have."

"But, really—I really do want an answer to the question about anger in the work."

"It's like a piano. Anger is in the keyboard."

With financial backing from Zwirner and Coles, Wolfson had gone from Casio to Steinway, and he was hammering the keys. In 2016, he showed "Colored Sculpture," a demonic, larger-than-life amalgamation of Huck Finn, Howdy Doody, and Alfred E. Neuman, attached to a gantry system by heavy chains at its limbs and its head. In the course of a fifteen-minute performance, during which fragments of Percy Sledge's "When a Man Loves a Woman" play, the gantry flings the puppet around the room and bashes it noisily against the floor.

The puppet's eyes, which have video screens behind their convex surfaces, display an inscrutable kaleidoscope of images—snickering emojis, a child pointing a gun into his own mouth, Betty Boop—as Wolfson recites a horror-movie version of a nursery counting song. "Two to kill you," he says. "Three to hold you / four to bleed you / five to touch you." The rest of the time, the eyes are alert and emotive, the irises an electric cornflower blue. Using a machine-vision system—the same type used by the military-grade robotics company Boston

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## WOODEN BENCH

I was sitting on a wooden bench
when six men wheeled her on a gurney right past me,

except she was inside a wooden box
and the lid was closed. She was on her way

to becoming a skeleton. My father
is definitely a skeleton at this point.

Death is confusing. Is my father the bones
that sit inside a box on a hillside

in Odessa, Delaware? Or is he on the other side
of that keyhole in my mind that I talk into sometimes?

Can he be in two places at once? Am I allowed
to make it up, the way twelve-step programs tell you

you can make up God? God can be a ribbon
on the door, a nail in the wall.

A nail in the coffin. It’s 4:59 A.M. The sky
a deep ocean blue. The birds going nuts

in the trees. Do birds dream?
My daughter likes to tell me her dreams,

especially when I do something bad.
In an hour, she’ll get up for school.

It’s exactly mid-May and half the trees on this street
don’t have any leaves. Do I miss my father?

In his presence, my head would start to throb
like a blister and I’d take naps in random places

to make the throbbing stop. We were close
when I was a child, and he wasn’t lying when he said

he was my history book. The birds are whistling
but they are not whistling for me.

—*Jeffrey McDaniel*

Dynamics—the puppet can identify individual people in the room and meet their gaze. Mark Godfrey, a senior curator at Tate Modern, told me that, seeing “Colored Sculpture,” “I lost control of my critical faculties and gasped out loud.” The piece, which cost a million dollars to produce, was quickly bought for three times that amount and donated to the Tate.

“Colored Sculpture” took a demented white figure that seemed conjured from Midwestern Americana, invested it with attributes of both victim and aggressor, and, through the title and the music and the chains, seemed to relate its position to that of enslaved black Americans. In an essay for a book that accompanied the show, Godfrey praised Wolfson’s approach: “Imagination married to ambition.” He wrote, “Like other artists before him, Wolfson refuses to let his imagination or production be policed, and knows that to confront the world as one finds it, one has to look at it wholly, taking in its ‘cute’ freckles and its ‘ugly’ warts; understanding its gentle touches and killer punches.”

Reviewing the show, Ajay Kurian, an artist who often addresses matters of race, argued that it should be seen in the context of politics, not art history. “Like most racism of the current moment, plausible deniability works like a well-oiled escape hatch,” he wrote. The sculpture’s name was too loaded to simply be a reference to classical sculpture, brightly painted before time turned it white. “The title leads me to believe something more sinister is at work (intentional or not), and that the resentment of this figure’s gaze is particular to our moment—a moment where just days ago a misogynistic, racist, resentful, angry, overbearing, incoherent, unqualified, and profoundly dangerous man was voted in as our next president of the United States.” Kurian wondered what the effect would have been of seeing a black boy in the place of the Huck doll. (A later version of the piece, shown at Sadie Coles’s gallery, was monochromatic black; the title was “Black Sculpture.”)

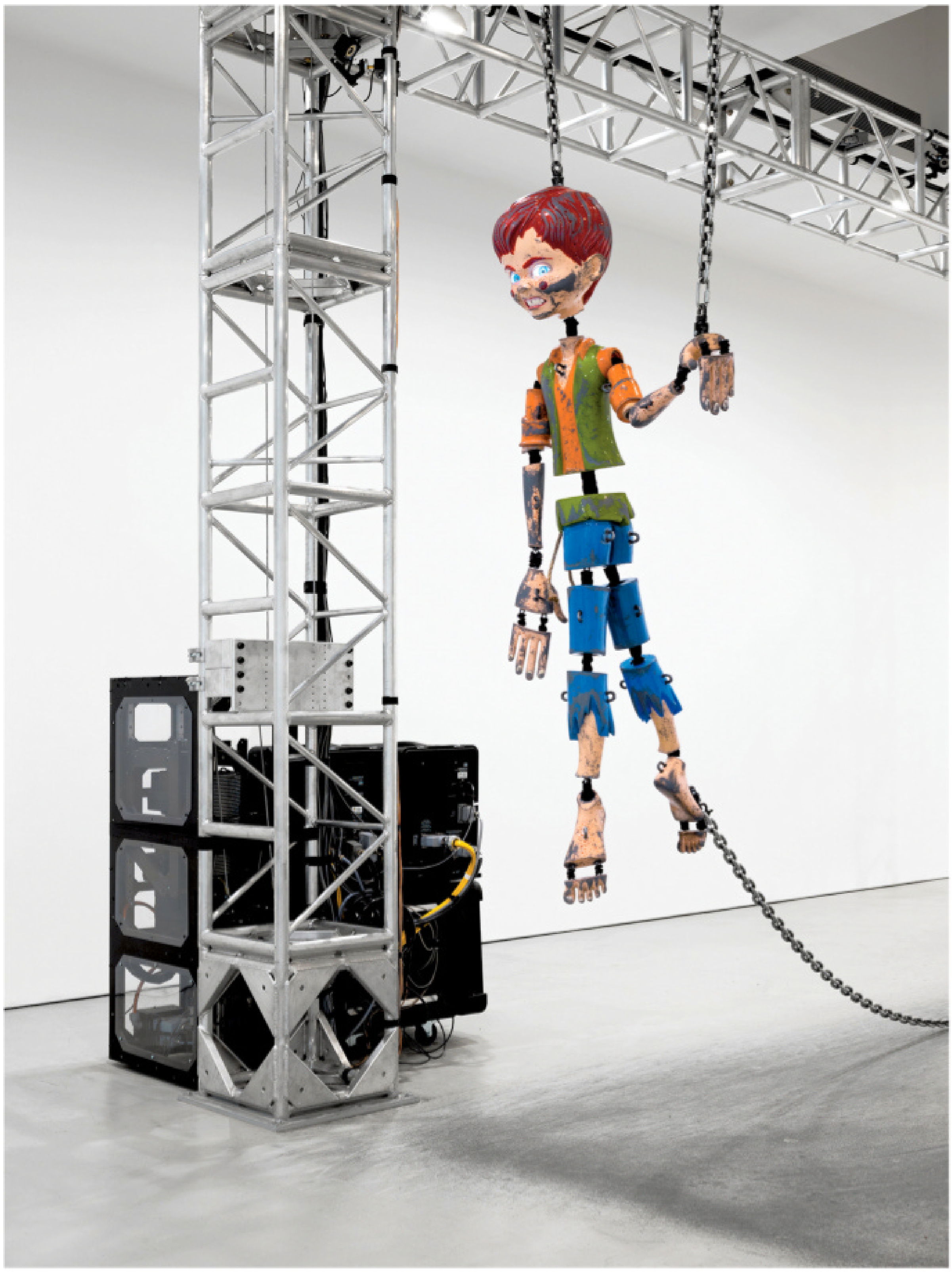
“Sensitivity is his material,” Coles told me. Just as the culture was demanding an end to the dominance of straight white men, Wolfson seized on the identity as the last taboo. The choice was provocative, but, by the emerging rules of political discourse, defensible. No one could deny his right to explore the most troubling facets of that identity.

“Made in Heaven” is a singularly transgressive series of works, by Jeff Koons, that depict him and his then wife, the white-blond porn actress Ilona Staller, acting out the Kama Sutra against an Eden-like backdrop of flower mounds and writhing snakes. The project débuted in 1990 and was thoroughly panned. For a time, Koons, who had crossed an invisible line, was expelled from the art world. Then he was back, more exalted than before. In “Female Figure,” Wolfson borrowed several important gestures from Koons: the idea to sully the figure, the platinum blond of the figure’s hair, and the fact that the figure makes eye contact, as Staller does in a central image in the series. It placed him in a lineage, flattering both the more established artist and the viewer alert enough to notice.

From the beginning of his career, Wolfson has dropped hints about his sexuality; playing an ever-so-slightly-gay straight man is one of his favorite gambits. An early project of his took lobster claws and covered them in images of gay porn. On a podcast released in September by David Zwirner, Wolfson, chatting with the playwright Jeremy O. Harris, who is black and gay, said that his “go-to porn” when he was a kid was “Trading Places,” and that he considers himself slightly gay. “I’ve hooked up with guys and vibed with guys,” he said. Harris told him, “You’re gay-adjacent.” Another time, Wolfson asked Stefan Kalmár, the museum director, if he believed that a straight man could make queer art.

Wolfson told me that an intensive course of “plant medicine” had opened him up to the idea of a male partner, but that, “for the record, I’m basically straight.” In most of his art work, he assumes a posture of dominant heterosexuality, issuing directives and commands, calling the shots.

Visiting Wolfson’s Brooklyn studio in 2017, I saw a large ink-jet printer spitting out a photograph of him, naked, crouched in front of the oven



*In "Colored Sculpture," a dummy is brutalized to a soundtrack of classic soul.*

COURTESY DAVID ZWIRNER AND SADIE COLES HQ

in his apartment. He said that Charlotte Day-Reiss, who had become important, had taken the picture. "That's a Wolfgang Tillmans in the back," he said. "We woke up one morning, it was hot, and I'm, like, 'Let's make some pizza.' And we were naked. That's what you do when you're in love. With someone." He was in the process of turning the photograph into a metal wall piece. "There's something very mundane, and this somehow moved me," he said. I asked if he considered Day-Reiss a co-author of the image. He looked at me oddly. "No, not really," he said. "I don't know if I would let this be a narrative of the work. It's the artist's seeing the image and recognizing the image as potent that makes it art."

Several years earlier, Wolfson had met a young photographer named Gaea Woods. After a couple of dates, he saw on her Facebook page a photo that she had taken of herself, styled as Rosie the Riveter. Without first asking permission, he printed it out and covered it with homemade bumper stickers. ("Wanting Love," upside down, is plastered across one of her eyes.) On Instagram, he posted snapshots of himself, Woods, and the art work, but didn't mention her role in its production. The image, which was included in Wolfson's first Zwirner show, now hangs in David Zwirner's living room. Woods, who also went to RISD, became a psychotherapist.

Soon after Wolfson and Woods broke up, he began seeing Emma Fernberger, a gallery director who had recently separated from her husband, the heir to a prominent London gallery. Wolfson posted declarations of his love on Instagram, along with a picture of Fernberger, naked. One intimate image, with both him and Fernberger unclothed, he turned into a wall work, which was displayed by Sadie Coles at Art Basel, where Fernberger's ex also had a booth. A sticker on the image identifies Fernberger by name. The piece blissfully boasts of "Desire," "Honesty," "Energy," "True(ness)," "Real Love." It is as close to a love letter as anything in Wolfson's œuvre, but as a total art work—one that considers the response that it evokes, the way Wolfson's representatives insist his best work does—it is startlingly cruel. "His attitude is, may the bridges you burn light the way," Sarah McCrory, a curator who supports his work, told me. "He knows he's antagonistic, but I'm not sure how much he minds."

Wolfson would like to be thought of as a maker of fictions. But an artist who uses first-person monologue and images of himself invites people to read his work as autobiographical. His social-media performances of love and intimacy—often documenting preternaturally attractive women vacationing with him—are mirrored in his practice. When I asked him recently about putting girlfriends in his art, he became grumpy and withdrawn. "There's a long tradition of artist's muses," he said. "And I never put them in major art works. I don't want to implicate my exes." He attributed any discomfort these women might now feel to manipulations by others or post-breakup remorse. Later, when I raised the topic again, he said, "I'm not interested in defending myself. I'm not, like, a *gubbslem*, Swedish for 'gross male.' I'm just trying to be in the world and see its distortions and have it come out in my shape. I'm flawed, and I'm not resisting that."

I called one of Wolfson's former girlfriends recently, looking for insight. "I'm a little worn out of talking about Jordan, 'cause I talked to Jordan yesterday," she said. "I want to make sure I can answer lovingly." Later, she texted me that perhaps it would be better if she said nothing. "Oh, barf," another said, before describing a trajectory of intense, exhilarating seduction followed by a nasty dénouement of fault-finding and blame. In 2017, Wolfson produced a video companion to "Colored Sculpture" called "Riverboat Song." A red-haired trickster, voiced by Wolfson, begins a disquisition on relationships:

> I want you to say things like, You're a really good person, I know that now. I want you to get excited when you see me. I want you to feel sad when I don't want to see you. I'd also like you to do things for me. Like cook, or advise me on cleaning. Maybe even do it for me. Yes, do it for me. I'd like you to follow my dietary instructions as if they were made in generosity and not control. I'd like you to understand that I am not responsible for my rage but it's instead a response to your correctable defects. I'd like you to love me more than anything, and do as I say, and be strong and empowered, sexy, stylish, and sassy, despite all my oppression. When I leave you, you'll forgive me and blame yourself. You'll feel as if you've been fired, or reëvaluated as a problem. You'll find my lack of empathy disturbing, and you'll grow resentment. But, since I've decided to pay your expenses for one year, you'll feel obligated to remain silent.

Then the little red-haired guy pulls down his tattered cut-off jeans and pees everywhere. Was it self-mockery—an acknowledgment of gender privilege—or a taunt with an intended audience of one?

Wolfson's uncomplicated relationships are with his dogs, Midnight and Broomstick, both rescues. Most of the framed pictures in his current home, a rental overlooking the reservoir in Silver Lake, Los Angeles, are snapshots of them—noses, straining leashes, distant figures romping in a field. With women, "no one's been there long enough to get attached to," Brooke Garber Neidich, the Whitney trustee, says. "Often, it's someone really interesting—or not. I've probably seen the dogs more than anything."

Wolfson and Day-Reiss broke up in 2018, and she moved to Las Vegas, where she is creating an animated A.I.-powered girlfriend who can text, call, and FaceTime users. At eighteen months, their relationship was among the longest of Wolfson's adult life. The naked pizza photograph proved to be a significant chapter. Day-Reiss challenged him about it, saying that its power was not conferred by him but was inherent in its unique point of view—hers. Eventually, Wolfson agreed to split the proceeds of the finished work. "An artist sometimes thinks they're an island where they take, take, take," he told me, not long ago. In the photograph and in the argument, he seemed pleased to have Day-Reiss help him look at himself. "Charlotte's genius is making me think about how I see things," he said.

Wolfson spent the month of January editing and reworking a holographic piece: twenty fans, the kind used in nifty corporate displays, playing images on their rotating blades. I went to visit him in a large warehouse studio in Glendale, next to the special-effects firm where he made "Female Figure" and "Colored Sculpture," and where he was working on the Cube.

The studio was filled with older works—a log cabin, the size of a storage shed, with a grimacing face; parts of "Female Figure." One corner was dominated by a human-scale Halloween display that Wolfson had bought at the Home Depot around the corner: three witches stirring a cauldron, which he had stickered with the messages "Everyone is gay" and "Describing how a dog was slaughtered." There was a rowing machine, for spontaneous workouts. Midnight loped over to his bed and lay down.

Sadie Coles was visiting. In the nineties, Coles worked as a studio manager for Jeff Koons; at her gallery, which opened in 1997, she shows Matthew Barney, Sarah Lucas, John Currin, and a number of the group known as the Young British Artists. Wolfson's new piece was set to open at her gallery in two weeks.

The title, "Artists Friends Racists," had come to Wolfson in a flash. For almost nine months, he had been building an avalanche of images to express the notion: him at various art events during the past decade; art stars from the generation above him, many of them represented by Zwirner; black cultural figures; police cruisers; white people, including Macaulay Culkin, looking in the mirror, with yellow halos drawn above their heads; animations he commissioned, including one of a puppy getting shamed and spanked.

Coles, who has close-cropped gray hair, pulled a chair up to a pair of computer monitors. The sound of whirring fans filled the studio. Wolfson clicked through files for her. "This is called 'Interracial Kids,'" he said, as pictures of children, images pulled from the Internet, came onscreen. "There's a bagel. I just don't like the bagel. Bagel's out. Look, there's the Star of David." Six-pointed stars spun like chorus girls across the fans, unzipped themselves, and metamorphosed into juicy red hearts.

"You took out the asshole," Coles observed.

"It was too much," Wolfson said. "It brought the piece into a space of negativity."

"Good, 'cause Laura who works with me was a little worried about that."

Wolfson showed Coles images of himself as a child, which he had graffitied with horns and placed in a prison. "I'm the devil, and then I'm behind bars," he said.

"Brilliant," she said. "Your mom's going to love that."

In the studio, I asked Wolfson if he felt that it was becoming harder, given his status as a straight white man, to make his art. "Totally," he said. "I didn't choose to be who I am. I'm here to see the world and to have an uncensored experience of the world. That doesn't mean I have the privilege to shit all over my audience through provocation."

He told Coles that he wanted to include images of Klansmen, and of a grotesque Dutch holiday tradition in which white people paint their faces black, in reference to "Black Pete," a Moorish chimney sweep who serves as Santa's helper. "Do you think it's O.K.?" Wolfson asked. "Ummm," she said, mentioning that the dispute over the propriety of Black Pete had been all over the papers again recently.

"But I'm not claiming any agency to the black experience," he said. "This is from my experience, which would be a white experience, of, like, a liberal person who doesn't identify as a racist but grew up in a racist culture and therefore is conditioned to racism." He seemed newly concerned about overstepping, but as determined as ever to invite condemnation.

Coles thought for a moment. "The thing is, your position as an artist has always been to present this material without judgment," she said. "It's not so different from any other thing you might choose to put in this collage. By presenting the Ku Klux Klan or Black Pete, you're not saying, 'I condone it,' you're not trying to put yourself in a judgmental position, you're presenting it as a collage. You've said interesting things about the moral authority of the artist. This material is out there, so therefore you have the right to use it." The bagel was out; Black Pete and the Klan were in. But maybe, Coles suggested, he should skip the pictures of himself as a devil-child.

Wolfson immediately grasped why. He was trying to occupy a new position, that of investigator rather than instigator. "Baby Me implicates me as a trickster who should be in prison," he said. "The point of the work is that I'm a seer, not a trickster."

Wolfson says that "Artists Friends Racists" is about trauma. "My career has been a traumatic event for me," he told me in London, the day before the opening. "Regardless of how much the art world says, 'Make whatever you want, do whatever you want,' I do find it relatively conservative, with invisible lines of things that are permitted and not permitted." I said I perceived numbness in the work; perhaps the lack of a moral stance had become a limitation. "If art is supposed to be celebratory and propose a better world, for me that's decorative art," he said. "That's fine. But you're looking at my work from another genre."

For the opening, Coles promised a mega beer party. Students in streetwear—fashionable sneakers and brightly colored woollen hats—clustered in front of the whirring fans. In blue light, everyone was a teen-ager up all night, with the computer working to cool itself down. Wolfson wore a rust-colored vest, to keep his core warm. "Do you like it?" I heard him ask several people, as they looked at the piece. "It's cool, right?" I talked to an artist in a faux-leopard bomber, who described her own work as "Matthew Barney on a budget, and a woman." A former sex worker, she saw "Female Figure" as the embodiment of how society sees women, the male gaze laid bare. "I wouldn't say it's degrading in any way," she said. "But this—I'm Jewish, and I'm a bit annoyed. He's not really had to struggle in New York, being an upper-class Jew. I'm a lower-class Jew, and I had to struggle." Later, I saw a man with long dreadlocks watch thoughtfully through a sequence showing black-and-white cop cars, then seem to lose interest when the Black Pete pictures started. "I don't fully understand where you're going," he said to Wolfson, who was nearby. Wolfson smiled evasively and said, "I don't fully understand where I'm going, either."

The day after the opening, Wolfson came into the gallery wearing track pants and a sweatshirt, on his way to the gym. Someone showed him a pair of good reviews, and he was pleased. He had just one question: why had the show been awarded four stars instead of five? The gallery staff reassured him that that part of the review was meaningless.

"You have the impression that I'm not good at taking negative criticism," he told me, as a gallery assistant handed him a green juice. "I'm pretty much O.K. with negative criticism, but trolling art criticism is a trend currently. It's not serious art criticism, but it's potentially the appropriation of hate—like hate criticism. It's not just me. It's other artists, we're in this very polarized environment, and writers are writing from a more antagonistic, vitriolic place than we've seen before. One hundred per cent I will not defend myself. In Buddhism, they say, 'Let the karma die.'"

One night in London, Wolfson went to dinner with a group of studio employees and representatives from Sadie Coles's gallery. It was the second Yotam Ottolenghi restaurant he had dined at that day. He was chewing on the question of who is allowed to say what. "People said I don't have the right to make 'Real Violence' because I didn't grow up in a place where I witnessed violence," he said. "I grew up on the fucking Internet. Are you out of your fucking mind? Who came up with that! What's intersectionality—the person who suffers most has the most right to speak?"

Kenzy El-Mohandes, Wolfson's studio manager, a woman of Egyptian descent, corrected him. "No, it's about double jeopardy," she said. "Your perspective is informed by the number of identities you carry." She looked at him with gentle reproach. "Cancel culture has negatively affected your understanding of intersectionality," she said.

"I'm not here to heal the world," Wolfson said, digging into his fish. "I'm an artist. My job is to see the world."

Wolfson's major contribution could be his ability, however unconscious, to embody the world, describing and even enacting the degraded standards of interpersonal behavior that have accompanied enhanced technology. Aria Dean, who was recently promoted to editor and curator of Rhizome, a digital-media platform affiliated with the New Museum, thinks that Wolfson gives the art community a place to focus its rage. For her, the work is a relief from tidy self-expression and meaning-making. "There's got to be room for art that asks questions rather than answers them," she said. "And it's sticky—it's doing something that creates friction, and I want to figure out what it is."

But a number of curators who have worked closely with Wolfson seem to be quietly withdrawing public support. Wolfson cites Scott Rothkopf, the chief curator of the Whitney, as an important ally, but when I asked for an interview he thanked me and said that he was "all talked out." Chrissie Iles, one of the curators who selected Wolfson for the 2006 Biennial, suggested that she wasn't the right person to talk about his recent work. "My experience really is at the very, very beginning of his career," she said. Alex Zachary, whose gallery showed "Animation, masks," said, "If I were in the field today, I certainly would not present that work, at least not if it had been made today. Even at the time it was made, it was probably ill-advised."

I asked Mark Godfrey, of Tate Modern, if Wolfson was in the process of being cancelled. "Four years ago, 'Colored Sculpture' was first shown at Zwirner," he told me. "One would have expected a major American museum to do something focussed on Jordan in that time. I think you've got your answer. He's an extremely ambitious artist wanting to engage in the most difficult aspects of contemporary life, the dirt. Any number of American museums might have been interested."

"The fact that Jordan hasn't been cancelled in an open way is a testament to how carefully he's played these notes," the artist who knows him well told me. " 'Colored Sculpture' has just a little hint of racism, like cinnamon on a cappuccino. Literally nothing is being said about race. It's a note being played to raise some eyebrows. It's very safe—just enough of a titillation of something unpleasant that it makes the audience feel uncomfortable." Leaving the gallery, he said, people have nothing to think about, so they just shrug and say, "That was weird."

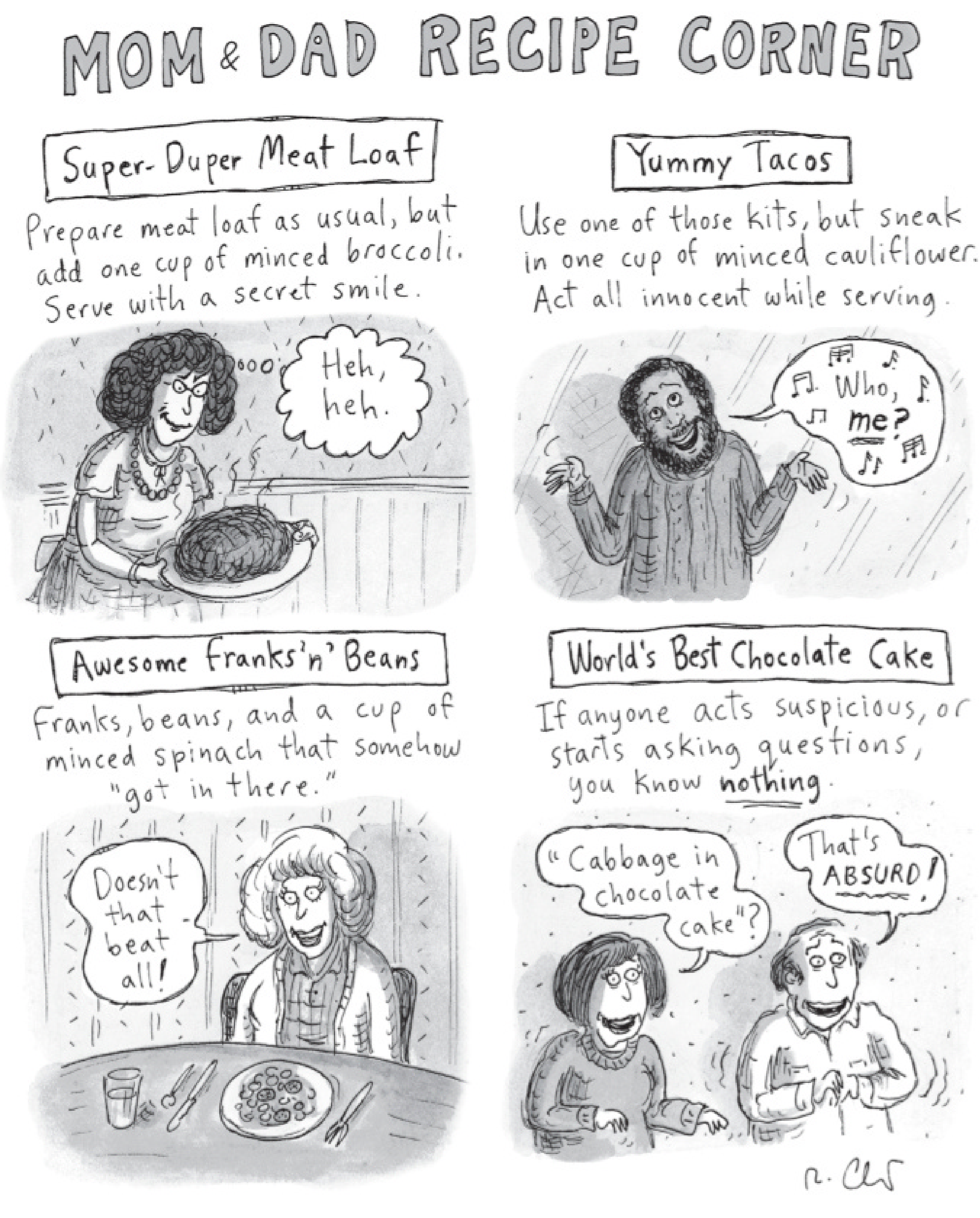
Like "Colored Sculpture," "Real Violence" has found a more receptive audience overseas. It was recently acquired by the Castello di Rivoli, a museum outside Turin, where it will be included in a group show in the fall. "Nobody wanted to acquire it in U.S. institutions, because the work is very challenging and provocative," the director, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, told me. "How do I say this without condescending? The American art world takes things very literally, and his work puts the knife right in the wound."

European curators and gallerists bring their own intellectual and political baggage to Wolfson's work. Christov-Bakargiev told me that she sees "Real Violence" as a critique of the destructive potential of drone technology, or of a smart home that can, in the hands of a fascist government, become a prison. "This is the same as the critique of Arendt and Adorno," she said. "He's an heir of the school of Frankfurt—though I don't know if he reads." Zwirner admitted to me that when he first saw Wolfson's "Con Leche," a video that shows marching, milk-filled Diet Coke bottles, he thought of Hitler's goose-stepping Army. Many Europeans I spoke to invoked exhausted clichés of Jewishness to describe Wolfson, citing his anxiety, his neuroticism, his "Woody Allen" affectations. "He's sarcastic, he's witty, he's fun, and also there's the Jewish behavior to be ironic, self-ironic, and very aggressive," Thomas Trummer, the director of Kunsthaus Bregenz, in Austria, told me. "In the V.R. piece, you're supposed to intervene, but you don't, you can't. This is a reference to the burden of history. When is the point when we are supposed to intervene?"

Wolfson wanted the Cube to have its début in a prominent American museum, rather than at one of his galleries, but that didn't happen. "It's O.K.," Wolfson consoled himself. "It's totally O.K. Some people are interested, other people are not." Eventually, he made a "pitch" video, a giddy hard sell for the art-historical importance of a metal box that fucks the floor.

The pitch worked, but not in New York or L.A. Last fall, the Cube was bought by the National Gallery of Australia, in Canberra, where it will go on display in 2021. The cost was nearly five million dollars, the museum's entire acquisition budget for the year.

"It's quite the bush capital," Nick Mitzevich, the museum's director, told me. "You have to drive through a few hours of rural Australia to get here." He thought that the Cube would be a real draw. It can point at the audience members' genitals, he told me, wonderingly. "There is a sense of pilgrimage," he said. "Jordan's work will help enhance that idea that you've come to see something extraordinary." If it causes a scandal, they might not even hear about it in New York. ♦


MOM & DAD RECIPE CORNER
Super-Duper Meat Loaf
Prepare meat loaf as usual, but add one cup of minced broccoli. Serve with a secret smile.
Heh, heh.
Yummy Tacos
Use one of those kits, but sneak in one cup of minced cauliflower. Act all innocent while serving.
Who, me?
Awesome Franks'n' Beans
Franks, beans, and a cup of minced spinach that somehow "got in there."
Doesn't that beat all!
World's Best Chocolate Cake
If anyone acts suspicious, or starts asking questions, you know nothing.
"Cabbage in chocolate cake"?
That's ABSURD!

THE WORLD OF FASHION

# GET THE LOOK

*Telfar Clemens takes inspiration from mass appeal.*

BY EMILY WITT

Last summer, the fashion designer Telfar Clemens was thinking about cargo. In July, his label, Telfar, moved its studio from a warehouse in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Bushwick to four shipping containers down the street. The containers were stacked across from a corrugated-metal quonset hut in a gravel yard that recalled a landing-strip airport in a tropical country, exposed to the elements and easily dismantled in an exodus. As Clemens designed his Spring 2020 collection, he was considering the cargo economy. Globalization has produced a lingua franca of T-shirts and jeans, sweats and tracksuits, polo shirts and basketball shorts. These everyday garments are the ones Clemens has returned to most often in his designs. The label's clothes are standardized forms that seem to have undergone a process of estrangement. They're sold under the slogan "Not for You, for Everyone."

I visited Clemens one afternoon last July in the red Hyundai shipping container that he was using as an office. He is thirty-five, lanky, and graceful, with a gap-toothed grin and a smoky laugh. That day, he was wearing a net tank top with Rastafarian stripes from the dollar store, Telfar knee-length denim shorts, a gold Telfar-logo necklace, and black Converse sneakers. For the Spring 2020 collection, Clemens was crossing the Atlantic to show in Paris for the first time. He and Avena Gallagher, Telfar's longtime stylist, had decided to play with an archetype, that of the newly arrived immigrant naïf known in the West African diaspora as a Johnny Just Come. Clemens called it "you've-just-come-to-this-country kind of styling": new and secondhand clothes combined in slightly the wrong way. On a board were photographs of Clemens wearing various iterations of the look: a starched collar underneath a hoodie, running shorts over fishnets, track pants paired with a blazer. The collection had a lot of cargo pockets. Some were in the conventional places, on pants and vests; others were affixed to the sleeves of T-shirts or along waistbands.

Clemens was born in Queens, to Liberian parents. He started his brand as an undergraduate at Pace University, in 2005. At the time, many of his friends dressed in ways that crossed gender lines, and, a decade before Gucci, Balenciaga, and Tom Ford had coed runway shows, Telfar's clothes were marketed as unisex. The label was as much an art practice as it was a clothing company, and, for many years, Telfar was worn primarily by a small, knowing cohort of people, the types who frequented the roving New York party GHE20G0TH1K and read the online arts-and-Internet-culture magazine DIS.

Clemens has always biked around New York, and many of the ideas for his designs have come from glimpses of pedestrians: a tank top tailored to look like it has fallen off one shoulder; "drop-waist jeans" that mimic boxers peeking above sagging pants. Clemens's work often pays subtle homage to street retail, with its gold chains pinned in lines on red velveteen cushions and sundresses on headless Styrofoam mannequins. Recently, on a trip to Florence, Italy, he noticed that ubiquitous puffer jackets, seen against the city's medieval architecture, resembled suits of armor. The ruched costumes in Italian Renaissance paintings reminded him of the braided T-shirts sold in beach towns. The resulting collection, a Telfar press release said, was "like a drunk Medici daughter on spring break in Ocean City, Maryland."

The sole owner of his label, Clemens admires designers like Jean Paul Gaultier, who put men in skirt suits and borrowed from the uniforms of waiters and sailors, and Vivienne Westwood, whose relationship to London's punk scene bears some resemblance to Clemens's ties to New York night life. But he is just as influenced by Macy's and Marshalls. "I want to be Michael Kors, but on purpose," he has said. Gallagher noted that Clemens often refers to his aunt's Talbots catalogues: "He has always been super interested in what everybody wears rather than what the rare person wears."

In 2017, Clemens was the recipient of the C.F.D.A./Vogue Fashion Fund award. He invested much of the prize, four hundred thousand dollars, in the production of the Telfar Shopping Bag, which comes in three sizes, and is modelled on the dimensions of Bloomingdale's shopping bags. It became the label's best-selling item, and has jokingly been called the Bushwick Birkin. The Birkin, a bag made by Hermès, can retail for tens of thousands of dollars. The smallest Telfar bag can be had for a hundred and fifty dollars. The brand releases new colors on the first Friday of the month, when, as Babak Radboy, Telfar's artistic director, explained, "people don't have to worry about the rent again for twenty-five days."

"The label is like the fashion equivalent of a 1970s black punk rock band from Britain," Jah X, a New York-based SoundCloud rapper, who recently released a track called "Telfar Bag," told the magazine *Dazed*. The Telfar bag often accompanies a particular school of street style. Apparently bored with Minimalism, and too broke or hierarchy-averse to dress expensively, a generation raised with access to the entire history of televisual culture, on YouTube, and to a bounty of vintage clothes, on eBay, now specializes in the regeneration of hyper-specific American phenotypes. Their outfits are a kind of cross-dressing. You might see, at a fashion party in New York City, a man who looks ready to attend a monster-truck rally talking to a nineties raver chick.

I live in Bushwick, where I notice Telfar bags all the time. As I was getting to know Clemens, I kept a list of the

*Clemens, center, admires Jean Paul Gaultier and Vivienne Westwood, but he is just as influenced by Macy's and Marshalls.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY JUSTIN FRENCH

people I saw carrying them: a man with a flattop haircut on the train draped in an Eileen Fisher-esque assemblage of a wool poncho and scarf, with a tan Telfar bag and dark painted nails; a tall, thin man with short platinum hair wearing a red tartan dress and white platform sneakers, holding a tiny white Telfar bag and dancing at the back of the neighborhood bar Rebecca's. On Instagram, people post images of themselves with their Telfar bags from Paris, Seoul, and Montgomery, Alabama. Radboy described the committed Telfar customer as a "black-adjacent, queer-adjacent" person who, until recently, was not often found in fashion advertising. Gallagher said, "We're making clothes, but I think we're aware that we're trying to represent our people and our friends."

One day, the person I spotted wearing a Telfar bag was Clemens, pointing at me and winking over the shoulder of a drag queen he was hugging at a warehouse party near a Superfund site in Ridgewood, Queens. It was 7 A.M. on Labor Day, and he was coming off a d.j. gig. He was shirtless and wearing dark, flared Telfar jeans, Telfar jewelry, and a large lemon-yellow edition of his namesake bag, worn across his body. Clemens describes himself as a "really outgoing loner," and his friends respect the odd hours he likes to keep. "You can never get Telfar to go to dinner, because he's asleep between 5 P.M. and 8 P.M.," the artist Khalid al Gharaballi, Clemens's friend and former roommate, told me.

In conversation, Clemens has a tendency to drop a particular kind of visual reference—to, say, the way a woman dips her nails in a glass of champagne in "Showgirls," one of his favorite movies, or to the ballet flats that female office workers wear during the summer. (In 2013, he made a unisex version.) In their photo shoots, he, Gallagher, and Radboy like to comment on fashion's history of whitewashing and cultural appropriation. They have photographed their tattooed friends in cuddle piles, mocking the prep-school sexuality of Bruce Weber's Abercrombie & Fitch catalogues from the nineties, and, in a play on Ralph Lauren's long history of finding "inspiration" in Native American craftsmanship, they have put a Telfar logo in a dream catcher. A series of Instagram videos last fall to promote Telfar's jewelry line satirized Dockers ads from the late eighties. In the older ads, a group of mostly white banker types sat around discussing golf. In Telfar's version, friends talk about astrology.

At last year's Met Gala, where the theme was camp, Clemens dressed Ashton Sanders, an actor from "Moonlight," in a faded-black jersey tailcoat paired with breeches, a cravat, and white lace stockings. Clemens, whose hair was in a prom updo with tendrils framing his face, wore a garment that looked split down the middle, like a unisex-bathroom graphic come to life: a suit, made out of white jersey and printed with the words "Telfar 2020" in college-athletics font, worn with a one-shouldered black silk slip dress that had a hint of the mall about it. "Taking these things that people are used to wearing and recontextualizing them for a new person and a new time is what makes a lot of the stuff 'me,'" he said.

Radboy, a small, bearded man with round, wire-framed glasses, showed me a recent photo spread that Gallagher had styled for *Garage* magazine. (Radboy and Gallagher are a couple and have a five-year-old son.) In the photographs, by Roe Ethridge, Clemens and the playwright Jeremy O. Harris, a regular collaborator, pose for a formal portrait in coördinated knit polos and lounge naked on white couches under the chandeliers at the Belvedere, the clothing-optional men's resort in Cherry Grove. The images looked both familiar and not. A seventies porn shoot about two men in love on a military base? A *Life* profile of a U.N. diplomat?

"A lot of the images and things that we do are about visualizing a different world," Radboy said. "A lot of the images don't seem to take place today."

"But they will," Clemens said.

"Not in the past and not in the future," Radboy said.

"But maybe tomorrow?" Clemens said. "Like, after you see it, you start acting like it a little bit."

Radboy went on, "We're literally sometimes thinking, What person doesn't exist? And then, like, a month later, on Instagram, that person exists."

In addition to working for Telfar, Radboy, the son of Iranian immigrants, is the art director for *Bidoun*, an arts magazine about the Middle East and its diasporas. He is also, with Gallagher, a founding member of Shanzhai Biennial, a conceptual-art collective that once described itself as a "multinational brand posing as an art-project posing as a multinational brand posing as a biennial." At Telfar, Radboy has taken on the du-

ONE, TWO, THREE, FOUR, FIVE, SIX, SEVEN, EIGHT, NINE, TEN, ELEVEN...
BEFORE FITBIT
LFINCK

ties that Clemens is happy to avoid, like negotiating with corporate sponsors and talking about politics. Radboy is a high-concept sort of person. That day, he was contemplating how an idea he'd had for a magazine called *Radical Parenting* could be integrated into the Spring 2020 runway show.

"Is that a real magazine?" Clemens asked, only half paying attention.

"No," Radboy said. "It's the idea that every day you reproduce your life."

"Uh-huh," Clemens said. "I mean . . . I get the idea of being pregnant with yourself."

"You're like a newspaper," Radboy explained. "Every day, you have the new edition, and it's the same as the last one, and it reiterates everything that's true about the world and your own body, even if you don't want it to be true."

"Wow," Clemens said.

Like many indie fashion labels, Telfar uses marketing arrangements with larger companies to help fund its runway shows. On a laptop, Clemens and Radboy looked over the first images of a collaboration with Converse. A T-shirt was printed with the image of a basketball player posing like a ballerina in a pair of Telfar shorts, an example of what Clemens calls "get the look"—relatively affordable T-shirts printed with graphics of people wearing more expensive Telfar clothes.

Clemens often dresses friends for performances, and friends often work in exchange for clothes. One weekend, the R. & B. singer Kelsey Lu, who was preparing to perform at Afropunk, the annual black-music festival in Brooklyn, dropped by, carrying a large Telfar bag in fire-engine red. She wore her hair in thick red plaits, and her eyebrows were painted electric blue. Clemens embraced her and led her to a clothing rack.

"Pretty much everyone is sort of dressing themselves," he said, pulling out a leather jacket and a pair of jeans with flares made out of gray T-shirt knit. "I want you to choose things you actually like."

He helped her into a one-shouldered Afro-Jamaican string dress. Lu stood thoughtfully, sifting through the coat hangers.

"What's this?" she asked, holding up a small beige rectangle on a hanger.

"It's a knee brace," Clemens said. "It's a knee-brace bag." The knee brace had its own tiny cargo pocket.

Radboy often talks about the difference between "representation" and "presence"—between, say, a white-owned label paying a black artist to pose in its clothes and to post the image on Instagram, and Clemens dressing his friends for a party that he films and puts online. The distinction matters at a time when the fashion industry is proclaiming new ethical standards. Clemens has noticed that press about Telfar often uses words like "diversity," "community," and "inclusive." "I'm, like, always being included," Clemens said, dryly.

In the past three years, Telfar's runway shows have become mini-festivals featuring a certain kind of New York indie celebrity, such as the singers Kelela and Dev Hynes; Harris, the playwright; and the performance artists Wu Tsang and boychild. "I feel like Telfar circulates around a lot of—I hate to say it, but, 'black excellence,'" the writer, artist, and experimental chef Precious Okoyomon told me. Okoyomon recently cooked for a Telfar dinner at Mission Chinese Food, whose chef, Danny Bowien, is also a friend of Clemens's. Clemens made clear that his collaborators are not typical "brand ambassadors," in the way that Jennifer Lawrence is a "face" of Dior. Harris said, "Something that they do a lot with their productions is just let everyone jam." For the Fall/Winter 2019 collection, called "Country," which was designed around the tropes of cowboys and country music, models crowd-surfed in a mosh pit at Irving Plaza. "You can't get insurance for that," Clemens said, proudly.

For Paris Fashion Week, the Telfar team decided to make one of its most ambitious projects to date—what Radboy called a "multi-director" film. In the film, a traveller, played by Sanders, confronts a hostile security bureaucracy. Harris, the poet and d.j. Juliana Huxtable, and the visual artist Diamond Stingily would contribute scripts, along with the filmmaker Clayton Vomero, whom Radboy had hired to direct. "We're working with a group of friends that I've known for over ten years," Clemens explained. "Their takes on whatever we want to do will be what we want. Their eyes are like our eyes."

A few weeks later, on the first day of the film shoot, Clemens crammed into a white van with his makeup artists, his hair stylists, a studio manager, several models, a rapper, and a singer, and they headed to Staten Island. Shawn Mendes and Camila Cabello's "Señorita" played on the van's radio. Oyinda, a British-Nigerian pop singer who often models for Telfar, hummed along.

"I love the radio," Clemens said, scrolling on his phone. "I listen to every station." He tries to catch the daily roundup of new music on Hot 97 at two o'clock. "I listen to 105.1. I listen to Z100 early in the morning," he said.

"That's your vibe?" one model asked.

"Every vibe's my vibe," he said. The van crossed the Verrazzano-Narrows Bridge. "Staten Island is cute," Clemens happily observed. They pulled up to a marina full of tugboats called Miller's Launch, and everyone erupted in excitement.

"Whoaaaaaa, look at this!"

"Cuuuute!"

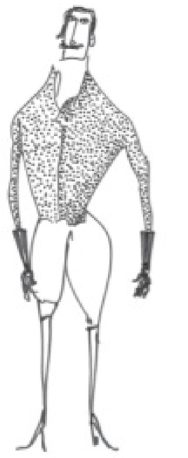
On a landing near the water, a group of five models in Telfar cargo-wear were rehearsing a dance, marching in place. The dance had been inspired by the poet Aimé Césaire's "Notebook of a Return to the Native Land" and was choreographed by one of Clemens's friends, Xavier Cha. Pregnant and dressed in a halter top and black motocross pants, Cha stood by the models, counting out the moves.

Gallagher, who is small and straight-backed, with long dark hair, wore a long denim skirt, a life jacket, and clogs. She was busy making sure that the models were wearing the right jewelry. The models skipped rocks as they waited to be ferried out to a barge, while Clemens and his crew worked from another boat that had been set up as a staging area. When the R. & B. artist Ian Isiah reached the barge, he belted out a song, his white outfit and long hair blowing in the breeze. "Ian is very 'Share My World' right now," Clemens said, finding the perfect visual reference in the 1997 Mary J. Blige album.

Vomero and his crew seemed disoriented by the casual spontaneity of Clemens and his team. During the next shoot, at Oakwood Beach, Clemens checked his hair in the reflection of someone's sunglasses, then paddled in circles on a handmade raft in the water. He was shirtless, with a silver-barbell belly-button piercing. "I like that black sailboat," Gallagher said, looking out at the water, as Radboy rearranged pieces of driftwood.

The tide line was littered with plastic bottles, tampon applicators, pieces of accordion pipe, plastic cups. Someone appeared to have done laundry in a little stream and laid it out over some rocks to dry. A Jamaican-American model named Johan Galaxy, dressed in a gray Telfar cargo vest and a blond wig, emerged from a changing area. "Where's Telfar?" he asked, and then saw the figure on the raft. Clemens was slowly floating away toward the horizon. "Oh, my God, why are y'all letting him play?" Galaxy said. Production workers were dispatched to swim the raft back to shore. When Clemens alighted, he immediately began inspecting the models, zipping zippers, tying drawstrings, tugging at waistbands, folding cuffs.

"Come, come, come," he beckoned to Galaxy, and turned him around. "I love this trashy-ass beach with this outfit."



Clemens is on the road for half the year, overseeing the production of his collections in Italy and China or visiting showrooms in Paris. When he is in New York, he lives with an aunt in a two-bedroom apartment in LeFrak City, a vast housing complex in Queens whose buildings were named for different countries in honor of the 1964 World's Fair. Clemens's aunt moved into the LeFrak apartment the week he was born, in 1985. His family spent his first year in New York, where his father, Major, got a master's degree at Pace. Then they returned to Liberia, where his mother, Hawa, and Major worked as civil servants. In 1990, civil war compelled the family to move back to New York. Clemens remembers hearing Technotronic and Whitney Houston on the radio, eating his first Butterfinger and his first slice of pizza, and mistaking the abandoned site of the World's Fair in Flushing Meadows Corona Park for Disney World. Clemens spoke Liberian English, and was placed in a class for English-language learners at P.S. 206. His teacher drew little monograms on the chalkboard using each student's initials. Clemens's monogram, a "T" inside a "C," became Telfar's logo.

Another half dozen relatives soon joined the family in LeFrak. Clemens slept beside his cousins on blankets on the floor of a bedroom. His parents slept in a dining nook. In 1993, the family moved to Gaithersburg, Maryland, a suburb outside Washington with a large immigrant population, where several of Clemens's aunts, uncles, and cousins already lived. Clemens recalls that his elders had a suspicion of outsiders; he blames the show "Unsolved Mysteries." "The first generation did not want you to be American, period," he said. "You get an American accent, and they're, like, 'Why'd you say that like that?' We were supposed to go back, but we never went back." Clemens is close to his family, and his mother books all of his travel and comes to many of his shows. "He was a very nice child," she said. "His family loves him, a lot."

Clemens started making clothes as a teen-ager, bleaching shirts and taking apart jeans and putting them back together to see how they were made. He got an education in house music and hip-hop when his older friends took him to the Paradox, a night club in Baltimore. He did not think much of high school or of life in the suburbs. "I got bored of being there, and just the idea of being there," he said. In 2003, the day after he graduated, he left for New York, and that fall he began classes at Pace, where he studied accounting. He moved into a dorm in the financial district, down the street from Century 21, the department store that sells discounted designer clothing. In between classes, he inspected the stock. He also adapted vintage clothes, which he sold to a consignment store in the East Village called Funky Lala.

The summer of 2004 was a peak of the "tall tees" trend, when teens were walking around in oversized white T-shirts. Sometimes the tees were muumuu-size, reaching the kids' knees. There was even a rap song about the phenomenon, "White Tee," by the Atlanta hip-hop group Dem Franchize Boyz. Clemens began to buy five-packs of white Hanes T-shirts and deconstruct them. He made a single T-shirt out of three T-shirts and another out of a combination of T-shirts and tank tops. A friend who worked in SoHo at the Vice store, a retail outlet of the media company, showed the shirts to the store's buyers, who decided to sell them.

Clemens started his label with the three-figure checks that he picked up every week from the Vice store. An aunt who worked for a sleepwear company supplied him with jersey-knit remnants. To support himself, Clemens d.j.'d at downtown bars with dance floors—Lit, Happy Ending, Home Sweet Home, Orchard Bar—and at a gay club in the East Village called the Cock. He stayed up all night, went to classes in the morning, slept for a few hours in the early afternoon, woke up, worked on his collection, and repeated the cycle. Sometimes he'd buy something to wear from Century 21 and return it the next day.

Gallagher, an Irish-Filipina-American, who worked as an assistant for the legendary *Vogue* stylist Camilla Nickerson, got to know Clemens while she was moonlighting as a go-go dancer at a bar on the Lower East Side called La Caverna. She was immediately impressed by the clothes he was making, which she described as "form studies—self-referential comments on clothing, like ubiquitous forms of clothing that were reimagined." In 2006, Clemens was selected by the talent incubator Gen Art as a "fresh face," and he did an internship with Cloak, a label known for military-inspired Minimalism. He began to hone certain forms, such as jackets and shirts with detachable sleeves, ideal for the indoor-outdoor shuffle of post-smoking-ban night life. He made pieces that could be turned upside down, worn one way as loose-fitting pants or flipped over as a shirt. Many Telfar garments are multifunctional: a cowl-neck that doubles as a hood; a hood that has a baseball cap attached to it; a scarf that ends in a pair of mittens. "I just didn't have the money to make anything that wasn't noticeable," Clemens said, recalling a "trenchcoat jumpsuit" that he'd made. Most days, he rode his bike all over the city, with a backpack full of clothing samples.

Clemens met the video artist Ryan Trecartin at the night club Happy Ending around 2005. As Trecartin recalled, "I was doing the splits, and I think he was d.j.'ing naked or something." Trecartin and his collaborator Lizzie Fitch had started to make hyperactive, reality-television-inflected video art, and Clemens was soon among their regular performers. They took trips to Kmart and Walmart together, to buy costumes. Trecartin told me that Telfar clothes remind him of Ohio, where Trecartin now lives. "There's something *middle* about everything," he said. "Like a medium, like an average—but it doesn't make it less unique. It's like a mutant."

In the early years of the brand, members of the fashion media attended Clemens's shows but rarely wrote about them. He was forever the "emerging" designer. "It was that 'off' thing you did during New York Fashion Week," Clemens told me. Financing the work demanded ingenuity. For a time, Clemens was represented by the Paris-based New Galerie, and he attempted to sell the videos he produced for his collections, along with the entire lines, as a single art work. Clemens courted corporate sponsors—American Apparel, Supima—that could supply him with raw materials. The filmmaker Leilah Weinraub, who has directed videos for Telfar, described the label in those days as "kids putting out ideas that stylists who had real jobs at fashion houses would bring to their real jobs working with celebrities."

In 2012, Shayne Oliver, who was Clemens's first boyfriend and remains one of his best friends, relaunched Hood By Air, a label he had started in 2006 with Raul Lopez, and the label's high-concept streetwear became a hit with young people and pop stars. Weinraub became Hood By Air's C.E.O. and began to improve the label's public relations, supply chains, and distribution. Clemens, who shared an office with the brand, started to make a similar shift, turning his conceptual label into a manufacturing company. He admits that he had avoided looking at "all the ugly stuff I didn't want to look at, like spreadsheets and numbers."

Around this time, Radboy, who had long worked with the brand, became the label's artistic director. He, Gallagher, and Clemens set about trying to make Telfar commercially viable. They did so with comic exaggeration, launching the Fall 2014 collection with the slogan "Extremely Normal™." Radboy wooed Kmart as a sponsor and decorated a space in the New Museum to resemble the store. Clemens and Radboy designed merchandise, including Telfar-branded T-shirts that said "Customer," and printed fake gift cards. They created the first Telfar bags as props. "Everything about that production was a leap," Fatima al Qadiri, a friend who has composed music for eleven of Telfar's runway shows, recalled. "Babak is a perfectionist, and Clemens needed Babak to come in and whip people into shape."

Trying to attract new corporate sponsorship, Radboy sought out partnerships with brands that few people would associate with fashion. In 2015, he made a deal with the hamburger chain White Castle, which hosted the after-party for the Spring/Summer 2016 show at its restaurant on Eighth Avenue. Radboy liked the event—at which alcohol was served next to the soda machine and Clemens's friends danced on the counter—particularly because it "felt illegal," he said. Jamie Richardson, a vice-president at White Castle, who is a father of five, a former Scout leader, and a member of the Kiwanis Club in Columbus, Ohio, remembered the night as "beyond Narnia" and "just really profound." In 2017, Telfar redesigned White Castle's uniforms, giving the unisex T-shirts an internal pocket and a sailor-suit-like collar that Clemens calls the "split-neck polo." He also created a capsule collection based on the uniforms, and the proceeds went to a bail fund for minors on Rikers Island.

In the past three years, Clemens has repurposed the Budweiser logo in his clothes with the same enthusiasm that Tommy Hilfiger has shown for the American flag, and has put Beats headphones on his models during runway shows. Telfar tends to turn down sponsors that want to use the brand to market to what Radboy has called the "desire for vicarious black authenticity." The brand prefers companies, like White Castle or, most recently, the Gap, that can introduce Telfar to people beyond cosmopolitan centers.

Attending Paris Fashion Week was a step toward getting the attention of European critics. For Clemens, it was the fulfillment of a longtime dream. Several friends were coming, including Kelela, Precious Okoyomon, and Jeremy O. Harris. So were Clemens's mother, two of his four brothers, and a cousin. In the days leading up to the show, Clemens, Gallagher, and Radboy worked out of a small studio in Le Marais with painted wood floors and a skylight that leaked when it rained. Elsewhere in the city, police were teargassing protesters with the *gilets jaunes*, but in the studio a Nespresso machine was buzzing away

*"F.Y.I., the last barber I ate went way too short."*

as models came by to try on clothes and practice their walks through a cobblestone courtyard. "Thank you so much!" Telfar, holding a packet of madeleines in one hand, said to a departing model. His lack of French was a source of suffering. "I can't even make small talk with all these boys," he said.

Gallagher and Radboy's son, Malcolm, was being babysat by anyone he happened to be near. After a difficult morning—he had thrown his Mario doll on to the studio's roof, a total loss—he sat on a love seat holding a paper bag of candy. "You can look at the candy and smell the candy, but you can only eat it after dinner," Gallagher told him, glancing over from the dressing area.

"Where are you from?" she asked a model who spoke English, as she tied a drawstring at the bottom of a cream-colored T-shirt, which had a band of brown horizontal stripes across the chest that reminded me of an Ocean Pacific skateboarding shirt from another decade.

The model, whose name was Brahim Hassan, said that he was from Chad. He was polite and a little bashful. When he'd arrived, Gallagher and Clemens had held a whispered conference of delight about his ears, which stuck out.

Clemens liked working in Paris. "There's not that much going on, in comparison to New York, where there's like a million things and it feels like it's Fashion Week all the time or something," he said. "People just actually go to sleep. They go and eat dinner, and they go to sleep."

Telfar's runway show took place at La Cigale, a historic music venue in Montmartre, on a Monday. The models emerged, wearing cargo-inspired looks, while on the screen behind them handsome young people floated on rafts and were wanded through T.S.A. checkpoints. The story of travellers confronting a surveillance state was cut with mini music videos by the rapper BbyMutha and the musician Steve Lacy. The film reminded me of waiting in the security line at John F. Kennedy Airport, where luxury-perfume ads play on a loop on L.E.D. screens overhead. At the film's dénouement, a group of models, passing around a joint as the sun set over Oakwood Beach, discussed the Internet memes of last summer. "It was, like, Why y'all talking about Popeyes when the Amazon is on fire?" Johan Galaxy, wearing his blond wig, said.

At the end of the show, the models and the Telfar team returned to the runway and started dancing. Harris, who was wearing Telfar running shorts over fishnets with a pair of Mary Janes that Telfar had designed for Converse, sprang up and joined them. The rest of the audience seemed unsure how to respond. When they realized that the show was over, they applauded politely. Backstage afterward, Clemens, Gallagher, and Radboy sipped champagne and tried to parse the reaction.

"French people are stiff as fuck," Clemens said.

Gallagher agreed. "I looked out there, and they were, like"—she made an expressionless face.

"I'm not pressed," Clemens said. "They all said, 'Thanks for coming to Paris.' That's all they've said. 'Thanks for doing this here.' I'm, like, O.K. . . . does that mean you liked it?"

That evening, at a party at a bar nearby, there were pearl chokers on men, earrings that looked like bunches of grapes, do-rags, intricate spirals of braids, mullets. One woman had dyed a black Telfar logo into her pink hair. Shortly before 3 A.M., a d.j. was playing Brazilian funk and Nigerian pop, and the crowd had thinned just enough that the truly committed could dance more freely. Suddenly, the music stopped. "This is an announcement that the person who is throwing this party just got thrown out of it," someone said into a microphone. A murmur of discontent filled the room. "Telfar got thrown down the stairs of his own party, so we are all going to leave this place. It's a wrap, it's a wrap, it's a wrap! How do you say that in French?"

Downstairs, stone-faced security guards were confronted by an angry crowd. The bouncers had pepper-sprayed a group of Telfar interns, models, and hairdressers, who were crying and pouring milk into their eyes. A few people shouted obscenities. A plastic water bottle hit a wall. Then another one. Clemens was down the street, surrounded by his friends. He explained that he'd learned that a bouncer had handled his mother roughly, so he'd asked the club to make the bouncer leave. An argument followed, which escalated until Clemens was dragged down the stairs. The bouncers pepper-sprayed the interns and assistants who came to his defense.

"I was just looking at this guy, like, You need to go, you need to go, you need to go," Clemens said of the bouncer. He groaned. "I haven't got into a fight since I was eleven."

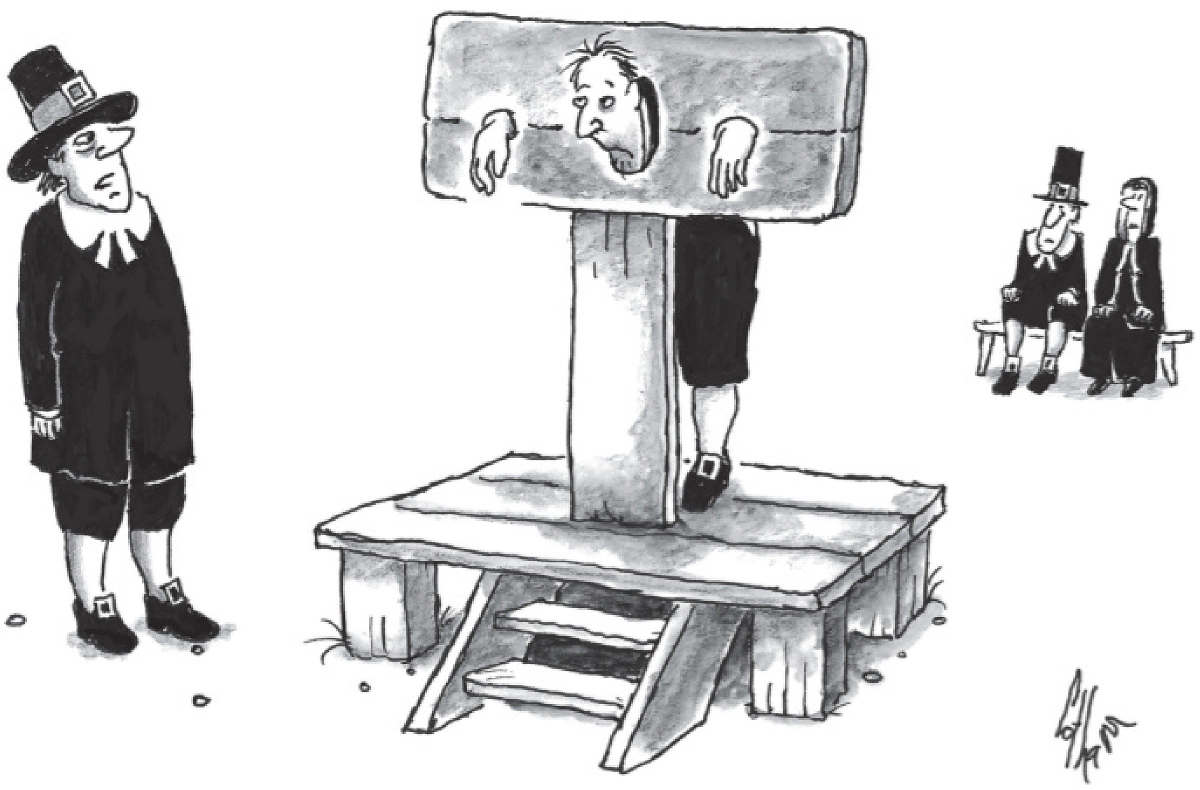
"I know you haven't," a friend next to him said. "Because you've had other people fighting for you. You can't fight!"

"I can't fight," Clemens said. "I can't fight." A car was called. Clemens got into it with Kelela, and they drove off.

"It was like the film we made happened in real life and vice versa," Radboy said weeks later, at the shipping container. The reviews of the show had been positive, but the usual words resurfaced. "Clemens's message of community and inclusivity is hard to resist," one critic wrote. "It was a super-energizing start to the week."

Radboy and Clemens were already planning their next show, for Pitti Uomo, the men's fashion event in Florence in early January. Partly in response to their time in Paris, they were thinking about the dynamics of guest and host, and how a word like "inclusivity" can carry the implication that an included person is a guest in someone else's house. They had decided to spend their budget on flying friends and family to Italy for an all-night "congress," at the Palazzo Corsini, that would be closed to the public. Radboy had built a round conference table that had microphones; it was inspired, he said, by the "United Nations or 'Dr. Strangelove.'" At its center, there would be a conversation pit that doubled as a rehearsal space. Beds would be set up for those who wished to nap. The idea was that the participants would make things among themselves, without having to sell, pitch, or convince others that what they did deserved "inclusion." For the runway show, which would be held on the wine-and-food-stained table the next day, the sanctum would be opened to the fashion press and buyers, who, finally, invited in as guests, would experience "the result and residue" of the party.

At the end of January, after four months of living mostly in Europe, Clemens missed LeFrak. He wanted to sleep in his bed and ride his bike again. So he returned to New York.



*"And, also, you will be satisfying the need for public art."*

He spent his first full day in Queens at home, resting. He stayed up late that night. He exercised in his bedroom, then sat up watching "Joseline's Cabaret," the reality show about a strip club in Miami.

Midnight came and went. It was January 21st, Clemens's thirty-fifth birthday. Sitting in his bathroom, where the Wi-Fi signal in his aunt's apartment is strongest and where he had therefore set up a small office, he began reflecting on his life. He used to joke that he wanted to design clothes that people would want to steal. But, at the end of December, a burglar backed a truck into the yard with the shipping containers, broke into one of them, and stole five crates of clothes from the label's archives. Clemens was ready for more stability: his own apartment; a place where his archive could be safely stored; an office where the Telfar crew could assemble every day during normal working hours; a "grown-up situation." It was time to move out of the shipping containers.

Thinking about his plans for the year, Clemens walked with his laptop into the kitchen to make a snack. Then he started to smell smoke. He walked around the apartment, checking on his aunt, who was asleep. He went out on the terrace. He went back to the bathroom and opened the door. The room was in flames. He woke up his aunt, who called 911, then dashed around collecting her things until he had to take her by the arms and make her leave. The fire was electrical and had started in a light fixture. The firefighters smashed out the windows in Clemens's room, where he kept boxes of clothes from his earliest collections. Everything was flooded and covered in soot.

"My birthday present was a literal fire under my ass," Clemens told me during New York Fashion Week, in mid-February, when I visited him at the apartment-hotel in the financial district where he was staying while repairs were being made at LeFrak. He was wearing a taupe zip-up hoodie and a pair of Telfar sweatpants made of thermal waffle weave. The apartment's living room was decorated in a kind of lowest common denominator of urban style, with a black modernist couch and stainless-steel appliances. He was enjoying living among corporate nomads and working out in the gym downstairs. Outside, it was raining.

Despite the tumult, he seemed serene. The fire had come laden with symbols, he said. He showed me a photograph of the card he had pulled at a tarot reading in Paris before the fire: the Four of Coins, from Miss Cleo's deck. It has an illustration with what looks like wisps of smoke in the background. Living near Pace, he felt that he had returned to his first days in New York. He could take the same walk to the Lower East Side to buy T-shirts that he had taken when he was eighteen. Century 21 was down the street.

All this seemed meaningful, he said, because, after the whirlwind of a season spent in the international fashion circuit, he wanted to remind himself of who he used to be, the striver biking around with his entire collection on his back. In the fall, he said, he had realized, "I don't need to be this European person that's, like, 'I'm going to design Balenciaga.'" He had mostly ignored New York Fashion Week. He was not motivated to make the kind of fashion that served a small class of out-of-towners, and he contemplated how he might sell his clothes in a different way when he was in New York. "Telfar Home," he joked. Perhaps he'd open a pop-up store. "People can come to Queens!" Trecartin and Fitch were planning to build him a tiny house on their farm in Ohio, where Telfar clothes would be sold on the honor system.

Clemens wanted to make ambitious designs for his friends, and also to have his name on the side of a bus. The collaboration with the Gap had been officially announced in January. It would give him an opportunity to do what he'd always wanted to do—to design an item of clothing so popular that, if you took a group of Americans in any city, one of them might be wearing a shirt of his design. "That ability to be present everywhere," he said. "You know it's me. You know what it is." For the collection, Clemens was returning to his archive, studying the pieces that he thought might become iconic. "What's the next bag?" he said. "What type of thing do you want to be in the world?" He said he thought that Telfar could take its place among other American "life style" brands that sell the basic clothes that everyone wears—Polo Ralph Lauren, DKNY, Calvin Klein. He would be able to make clothes that ranged in size from extra-extra-small to extra-extra-large, that people in the Midwest would be able to buy. He would show that ubiquity did not have to mean monotony. It could also be noticeable. "I'm American," he said. "There's no reason this can't work." ♦

# THE LIVER

MATHEW KLAM

ILLUSTRATION BY BIANCA BAGNARELLI

In the morning, the blinds let in light. I lay on a recliner against the wall, with my coat wrapped around my head, and heard the nurse pump the blood-pressure thing. I'd set up a barrier, a towel hanging over the back of a chair, for privacy. I'd been reclining here, listening to ice blow against the window, since about four. Kathy sat up in bed, looking pale, with blue lips and a puffy face. She was still on morphine and seemed serene and angelic.

Another nurse walked in, pushing a cart, and wanted to know if she'd felt milk coming out. Kathy stiffly undid her robe and both her hands trembled and I saw the funny webbed bandage across her belly. It was sort of threatening and serious and a little sickening, but I was so happy I didn't care. I got up then. My pants were open. I shut them.

The second nurse wheeled the cart to the edge of the bed. She wore red lipstick and hoop earrings, and had her hair in a tight bun that stood straight up on her head like a bowling pin. She stepped back to let the first nurse, who was older, explain the breast-pumping machine. The older nurse was tall but stooped, and wore a short-sleeved blouse with kittens on it.

Kathy's breasts looked full. She put the cups up to her boobs and the machine started sucking. There was nothing. Then the first drop of milk, bright yellow, dribbled down into the bottle. "Oh, my God," Kathy said. "I'm a fountain." Then another drop. The dairy had come in. What we needed now was a baby.

The baby had come—two months before her due date—after a late-night run to the emergency room, where it became clear that, for some reason, Kathy was in labor. We'd planned on spring, the beautiful explosion of April, the full, ready, ripened flowering, but it was February, and she'd been having contractions, undiagnosed, for two days, and then it was two o'clock in the morning and snowing like crazy, and she's lying there in our bed at home, moaning. I suggested the possible psychosomatic reasons for her pain, urging her to reflect on any anxiety that could be causing it. But when she called the E.R. the doctor was alarmed.

We put on our boots and got in the car and plowed across Western Ave. in silence, the only ones on the road, shocked at the sight of it—street signs half buried and fences swamped in drifts, each spindly vein of every branch articulated in gloppy white, and more coming down. The airport was closed, power lines bowed in swooping arcs, almost to the ground, and we held ourselves steady, a little dumbstruck, passing stuck city buses and evergreen boughs lying broken in the street, and finally spun up the hill toward a glowing "Emergency" sign, under a great overhanging deck, and a tall security guard in a rabbit-fur helmet took Kathy inside while I parked.

The E.R. nurse seemed alarmed, too, and called an emergency-labor specialist, and they tried over the next few hours to get it to stop but couldn't. And the baby was facing forward, which was wrong, and was breech, also wrong, appearing onscreen with her hands and feet pushed against the front of her bubble as if she were driving a truck. A new doctor appeared, an older man, an expert in premature birth, who looked out the window and clapped his hands and said, "There goes my golf game." He was worried that the cord might suffocate her, and that once he got her out her lungs might not work, or, after those first breaths, other things, even at this venerable gestational age of thirty-three weeks. He said the name of something, then told you what it meant; nothing was too dark or devastating to divulge—brain hemorrhaging and colon perforations and invading bacteria, rips in the insulation around her nerves. And, as she grew, it might be months, or years, before we knew the whole story—a higher incidence of cerebral palsy, mental retardation. It had begun wrong and now the wrongness would never end.

After some hours of labor, they tested the oxygen level in the baby's blood to see how she was doing. During the worst parts, Kathy attacked the wall with her claws. In between contractions, it got quieter, because there was nothing left to say. I'd jog to the nurses' station, to complain for her, stopping on the elevated pedestrian bridge where the ancient, red-sweatered volunteer ladies looked out over the hospital grounds, cataloguing the snowfall with immense concentration. They were trapped, too. We agonized over how much weight the roof could take.

Then the doctor did another test and suddenly new faces rushed into the room and put Kathy on a gurney while she signed papers.

I saw it all, the seven layers of skin and tissue, the yellowish fat, the muscle wall, the wall of the uterus, the blood. I hadn't known what to expect, so when the baby emerged, blue, screaming like a maniac, it was whatever I'd been feeling plus relief, ratcheted all the way up. Her lungs worked, she appeared to have all her parts, and they took her away. Kathy gave me a crimped smile, just a head behind a sheet, flying high on morphine.

Out in the hall, I didn't think about the night before, as the quiet of a cool, gleaming hospital at dawn helped me push those feelings far away. Instead, I thought of the T-shirt I'd thrown on back home in the dark, which said "Donald Trump," with "Fuck" in smaller script above it. A new mother walked toward me from the nursery, the lady from the room next to ours, haggard in her big pink nightgown, pushing her baby in front of her. The baby, a day old, lay flat in an open tray, and looked gigantic, ten or twenty pounds, at least. It was as long as a tuba and its face was pinkish white and its cheeks rested on its shoulders. No veins on its head, its skin wasn't mottled, it didn't have a wrinkled, wizened, thoughtful grimace. It looked sturdy enough to be drinking a glass of gin. I'd seen the grandparents the night before, trim and tanned in matching V-neck sweaters, celebrating. The new father, as luck would have it, had been moping around with a full-length cast on one leg, the moron, but now the mother was alone. Her belly was still large, and she walked by, head down, with an exhausted, shell-shocked, stumbling gait.

On the seventh floor, I scrubbed to my elbows and entered the sanctity of the NICU. The baby was sleeping in a plastic case, on her side, wrapped in a blanket, machines bleeping and whooping around her—breathing on her own, with the monitors above her. The apparatus around my kid, the oxygen tube in her nose, the crooked little hat on her head, her wormy pallor scared me. Behind me, two big men in soccer jerseys came through the door and crowded the nurses' station. In the corner, a young doctor with a shaved head and a young doctor with a three-day beard stood chuckling, their arms folded.

The first time I saw her, she was the size of a lemon, fourteen weeks old, swimming and slithering in magnified staticky grays. As the technician slid the thing across Kathy's belly, the parts ballooned, dissolved, flowed together like mercury. "Bladder, kidney, thigh bone," she said, as she captured their images and checked them off on a list. A black circle for the stomach, a foot, the arm bones, two tiny rows of what appeared to be teeth, curved into a smile—the spine. But the woman couldn't find the nasal bone or the heart. The baby was positioned so that her skull cast a shadow. The O.B. entered the room and frowned; the photos were no good. Then Kathy pressed her fingertips into her side, and for a second I saw the baby's four-chambered heart, blood moving in a trapezoid, like the ocean patterns around North America.

Kathy's pregnancy ushered in a new period of mystery, and was as unstoppable as the time that came before it, the months that stretched into years of hoping and trying and failing to make a baby.

We'd met as housemates, over the breakfast table, and, in the first endearing sign, sought approval for other lovers, her guy in the white leather jacket with fringes, my scowling Teamster lawyer. Kathy worked in neuro P.T., with people who'd injured their brains, and she was some years from having a doctorate. She was blond, Lutheran, selfish, thin, and Nordic. She watched violent cop shows at night, identifying (I assume) with the victim. Every so often, she knocked on my door at bedtime, looking overheated and bloodshot, and sat on my bed on a crying jag.

Her father died when she was a kid, and an older brother was killed in a car accident. Kathy's mom, in a state of dissociation from her remaining children, moved out to the beach with a new boyfriend, dropping off groceries once a week for Kathy and her younger siblings back home. Kathy's own brushes with death soon followed, on the backs of motorcycles, in cars that rolled. She was, understandably, braced for disaster. She'd been traumatized by her calamities and had a low tolerance for suffering. Or high—I couldn't figure out which.

*"Our rideshare is two minutes away, but it's been saying that forever."*

After the second miscarriage, we became intolerant of people who were pregnant or had small kids, and of people with their own health problems, and of people who did or said anything that got in the way of their boisterous commiseration with our struggle. Eventually, there was just my old friend David, now wealthy from developing shopping centers, and another barren couple, Tom and Jessica, and my office buddy, Maria, a loud, unashamed Greek woman who looked like Fred Flintstone and told hilarious stories of her one-night stands, and Kathy's Watergate hairdresser, Amistad, and his shiny boyfriend, Rick.

At some point, when it wasn't going so hot, I went to South Carolina to write a report for the coalition I worked for, on liquor-store employees who slip on wet floors, fall on their own guns, and shoot themselves. I left home again for a bulletin on the rights of undocumented immigrants being harmed in industrial settings; it would be part of a booklet we'd wave at Congress when our bill came up, and ship to news bureaus in our expensively illustrated year-end portfolio. I met a man who'd been crushed in an accident at an engine-casting factory near the Ontario border, which the insurance people refused to cover, then I spent two weeks at the factory where he'd been crushed, sitting at a card table by a two-story stamping machine, freezing my ass off. At night, I'd relax at the dining-room table in my bed-and-breakfast and talk with the proprietor, sipping her rum, thankful to have this work that was so removed from reality.

Back home, there were blighted starts and an ectopic pregnancy. We took a break from trying, and rode our bicycles together, and sat by the river in Georgetown and chatted. "I guess I've got a couple of good follicles," Kathy explained, and so we started again. She had appointments and things to inject herself with. "You should jerk off today so we can do it Friday, F.Y.I."

We were forced to apply all kinds of porn to the problem.

"Do you think any of them are attractive?" she asked.

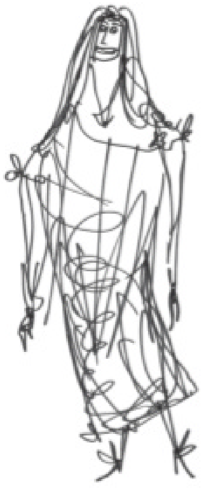
"Santa's helper."

She didn't lay a hand on me when we did it anymore, and afterward I was sorry to have to put her through this insemination. When we weren't conducting our marital affairs, I was cordial. As a couple, we were finished, though still copulating. Between the dirty footage and the dregs of hope, the furtive inelegance of our biological necessity, we stayed in business.

That summer, I travelled to a liquefied-natural-gas ship in the Gulf of Mexico, and when I came home there was nothing left to fix, nothing left to want, and I sat shaking like a coward. But she had news. Then she was ten weeks pregnant, and twelve. . . .

We got the chance to leave our history behind, transcend our suffering through a whole new language, one without freighted insults, and threats to end things or to bankrupt the other and cut off his dick. We traded old problems for new ones as the pregnancy blossomed into another kind of misery that I could only witness: an acid stomach at the end of her first trimester, so powerful she had to sleep practically standing against a wall; mysterious pains that shot down her legs, an agony that drove her, crippled and pantsless, into sobbing pleas for Vicodin. She became clumsy, forgetful, and fun. We were both a little amazed, and she ate like a crocodile, and laughed at her belly, and her anguish gave me traction. That she held my DNA mattered, and I caught myself staring dreamily, and smooched her for no reason, and sniffed her hair, and did her laundry, and anytime I heard her in the other room, breathing hard as she attempted to put on her shoes, a nameless euphoria overtook me. Something was happening to her, for our sake, and she became more, somehow—more willing, more sturdy, tenderly accepting of whatever I did to comfort her. At last, it wasn't her fault, and it wasn't my fault, and it wasn't the kid's fault. The kid was invisible, though unapologetic and a little cruel, considering. We'd have a baby soon, it would be as simple as that; it wouldn't be anybody else's, although I had no idea what it would be.

The nurse appeared, holding a bottle of formula the size of a tube of lipstick, and asked if I wanted to do the feeding. Before I could start, we had to do the diaper. Before that, I had to put on a gown. The nurse opened the hatches of the isolette and I reached in. A green plastic splint was taped to the baby's right arm to hold it flat for the shunts of her I.V.s. There were five very thin wires stuck to her chest with sticky pads, and one thicker wire taped to her ankle, and the wires draped down to the floor and then up to a monitor above her. I had to dodge all those to get the diaper on my kid, as her body wilted in my hands. The top parts and the bottom parts didn't seem connected. The middle was the droopiest. And then she began to wail, a faint, crackly sound, thrashing weakly, and kept going and wouldn't stop, because I was standing on the wires, ripping them off her skin. The alarm blasted, signalling heart failure. It was the same bone-jangling shriek that comes out of a fire alarm. Another nurse appeared, but mine waved her off, pressed a button to stop it, and then helped lift the wires out of the way.



"Sorry," I said.

"It's all right."

The baby seemed to be sleeping again.

"There's poo on her foot," the nurse said. "And you've got the diaper on backward."

The diaper had a picture of Baby Elmo on the front. I had to pull the tabs to the edge of the picture.

Then the nurse slid a U-shaped pillow around my waist and tightened the strap and I wore it like a guy selling peanuts at the ballpark. She showed me how to keep the baby upright with one hand, bottle in the other, one finger of that hand pressed up under the baby's chin, to remind her to suck. I did that. She started eating like crazy.

In order to eat, a kid needed to suck, swallow, and breathe at once, but the brain wasn't wired for that until it was fully cooked. In this case, that was two months away. So with possible choking and asphyxiation looming, the idea now was to not kill her. I had to hunch about ten feet over to see what I was doing. I got a crick in my neck. She needed to eat every two hours, or things would spiral down from here and a new plan would go into effect. She'd been doing O.K. so far.

"What a cutie," said a woman in a rocking chair a few feet away, holding her baby. It was the first compliment. It was such a lie that it hurt to hear. My kid was purple and scrunched and writhing, with a crabby look on her face like that of a guy on line at the Department of Motor Vehicles.

"Thanks." I felt ridiculous. "She's a little bug."

A man leaned over the woman's shoulder. "Well, now," he said. He also held a kid, wrapped tight. He swung it around in the crook of his arm like a salami.

"I'm Lizzie," the woman said in a high-pitched voice, waving her baby's hand. "What's your name?"

"I don't know." My kid didn't have a name yet.

They'd been in the NICU for eight weeks. They had twins, a boy and a girl. Until today, the boy had been across the hall in an even more intensive intensive care. They explained how to read the monitors, and pointed out the stash of sticky pads for the wires, and told me how much this place cost a day, and laughed because they couldn't pay for it and their parents were dead. The woman was short and svelte with dark eyes, and the guy was tall, bald, and heavyish, and looked like a hippopotamus. As they laughed, the boy baby's breathing dipped onscreen. When the number turned red, the woman stood and killed the siren as the dad waved a wand in front of the kid's nose, casually, as if he were misting a fern.

"That's apnea," the dad said. "That's normal. It's what we all do—we stop breathing between breaths." And it was especially normal in infants, he said, and even more in preemies.

The twins had been born three months early, barely a pound each, and had been put on ventilators, feeding tubes, the works. "One kid across the hall didn't make it," he said calmly. "But this guy's tough. He's a liver." The boy had already had surgery twice, "to get a valve clipped," whatever that meant, and for a blood-vessel malformation in his back, and the woman said he had an infinitesimal chance of brain damage.

While my kid drank her bottle, her little sea-monkey hands fluttered beneath her bib. When I let my finger roam away from under her chin, she slacked off and lost interest. I kept it tight against her.

Whenever I saw another baby struggle, I felt relieved, and I'd stare up at the big monitor with my kid's oxygen level. My kid was in better shape than that one, although she was on some of the same drugs, so there was a feeling of camaraderie, but also of competition. By the end of that first day, or the next day, or the day after that, I could tell by the amount of equipment around an incubator what kind of shape a kid was in. When a new kid arrived, with, like, two hundred feeding tubes, I couldn't look, but I'd assess anyway, hourly, making trips past the new people to count their baby's toes or explain how to read the monitors.

The woman put the girl back in her case, and, as she changed her diaper, she squeaked down at her, "Who's got nasty pants?," touching the girl's nose. "Do you want your Pooh Bear? Do you want your kitty?" she asked, and sang "Kookaburra." The girl's name was drawn on colored paper, stuck on the wall above the monitors, decorated with silver stars.

The dad weighed the boy and put him back in his case, then he picked up a backpack, looking scared.

"Did you just do that?" the woman asked.

"What are we talking about?"

"Where do you think you're going?"

He waved his fingers at the twins. "Bye-bye. I'm late."

"I love this crud," the woman said, alone now, washing the skin beneath her daughter's chin. "This is my favorite part."

When the woman left, I sat there for a while with my kid sleeping on me. The hat on her head was bending her ear. A flake of skin sat on her eyelid. I rested her on my shoulder and guarded her head from falling back. Her whole body fit in my hand and pulled down my shirt like a soaking-wet corsage. She didn't seem small to me, except when I compared her with something. Her forearm, for instance, was the size of my thumb. Then she sneezed. It was identical to a real sneeze, but on a smaller scale. And now she had hiccups. She wouldn't stop making noises. Her head smelled like an apple. "I have dirty pants!" I said to her. Then she grabbed her hat and shoved it to one side. Goddam hat!

The nurse came and took the baby from me—time to put her back in the case—and stepped aside for a doctor, who stood behind my chair, a distinguished-looking man I hadn't met before. He had a lengthy title embroidered on his coat and about sixteen pens in his breast pocket, and was tanned and bald with platinum wisps. He put his hand on my shoulder and walked me away from the incubators to some place between the nurses' station and the security doors.

"Your daughter had an EKG this morning," he said. "She also had a sonogram on her heart."

He held a small pad with a simple drawing of a heart on it. "This is a gap between the right and left atria. It's an abnormality." He drew the abnormality with his pen. He told me the medical name for it. And then I noticed that the next piece of paper in the pad also had a sketch of a heart—it was an entire pad of preprinted hearts. "And here is the pulmonary artery. And here is a partial blockage of the artery."

I held my chin very tightly with one hand, as though I were here only for his benefit. We were standing outside the NICU now, by the sink. People in street clothes rinsed their hands without looking.

The opening went between the two upper chambers. "It's supposed to close in the womb."

"So it's not closed?"

"No."

"Why is that?" Orderlies came past, their I.D. badges swinging, their voices full of life.

"We don't know why that is." He drew the blockage now, explaining the development of babies with normal hearts. He was exquisitely sincere and informative. What would I do when I went in there again, and saw her sleeping in her box, smirking in her dreams beneath her jaunty cap?

"So you go in there and fix it?"

"No. Not that."

"I see."

"We don't operate on either of these things."

"Why don't you operate on it?"

"We don't even track it."

"You don't track it?"

"No."

I didn't know what I'd just asked him, and I didn't know what he was saying back to me. "What?"

"It closes up eventually. It fixes itself."

He wanted to leave now, so he put a medical form in front of me and I signed it. He gave me some more exact and elucidating percentages, and said she'd outgrow it in six months. "One in a million doesn't close right. The rest of them are fine."

"Great!"

"Fine." He wanted his pen back.

"How about one in a billion?!" I was so relieved now that I patted him on the shoulder, as if to congratulate him, which he visibly hated.

Back inside the NICU, I stood beside her, holding the little sketch of her heart, shaking with gratitude, maybe, as the nurse redid the splint, shunts, and tubes with bright white tape.

"CUTE, HUH?" I noticed I was screaming. "Who's the little gumdrop?"

We stood there. I waited to see her fall into a peaceful slumber, although she was kind of wriggling, thrashing, trying to sleep, half crying between hiccups. There were blips on the monitor, and I knew exactly what each one meant. I studied her chart, the list of antibiotics, and somehow the word "caffeine."

"You're giving her caffeine? Like in coffee?"

"It's a very safe, very small amount." She was the day-shift nurse in charge, a young, dark-haired woman with geographically interesting lips, chapped and full, and a terrific nose, with wide nostrils. "There are very few side effects." Her nose was challenging me to look inside it. I turned back to my writhing kid.

"What's it for?"

"It reminds them to breathe."

"Or else they stop breathing?"

She said that there was information

## NIA

It sounds better in Spanish, *precario*
Prettier. As if it isn't what it is and there's that *o*

My how will the rent get paid? The deadline
Met and who ghosted me first—valley lover
Or that other one.

Delicacy of skin. Quick steps, quick stops
And the direction is what?

There's no where there and the last shift
Is the one where tongues load a stack of sighs
Bridge tall and mythic.

This day and the next—volcanic shards
Roll toward the door, even if mountains
Are in the far distance—thousands of miles.

How the heart steadily beats as the sirens
Careen and angry men launch their best lives
Ever by taking so many others. It is a miracle

This heart steadily beating even as the next question
Threatens a late spring storm, ground broken
By lightning—the raindrops rhythmic patter

Honors percussionists—those that beat   beat    beat
Their instrument with a purpose—Nia.
Knowing how one *off-beat* collapses the genesis
Augurs harsher storms—

Where the purpose becomes precarious.
Where death enters white armed, white throated,
Where the body drops like lightning on rain-moist ground.

—*Patricia Spears Jones*

on the new parents' bulletin board. I felt the temperature rising in my face. For ten years, I drank coffee. Every morning, I'd drink it, two cups, black, then go through the roof and crash by eleven, with a headache and diarrhea for the rest of the day. At night, I was so agitated I couldn't sleep, so exhausted I wanted to cry, lying there trying to get some rest.

"I wonder," I said. "I can't drink coffee."

"I drink too much," she said.

"It took me a long time to quit," I said.

"I take heart medication," she said, "because I have a heart palpitation, and I shouldn't drink more than half a cup, and I still can't resist those chocolate-covered espresso beans. And if I eat too many of them it's, like, 'Ugh, I'm dying!'"

"I know," I said. We stood there. I asked when the next feeding would be, and dumped my gown into the laundry pail and went over to the bulletin board, but I couldn't see anything except warnings about fluoride and shaking. I walked out. I had nothing to do for two hours. It was almost 7 A.M.

Luckily, a soda machine sat right there in the NICU waiting area. I bought a Coke, what the hell, and stared across the hall through the windows of the more intensive intensive care. A man in a blue blazer sat in a rocking chair by a stack of machines, with a blanket on his lap. My eyes blurred and I felt dizzy. A Russian-sounding family had taken all the seats in the waiting area, three long-haired women, a balding man, a teenager with a mustache, and a little kid on the floor, so I rested there for a moment by the elevators on what I came to see was a helicopter-ready baby life-support gurney, with shiny alloy struts and screaming-yellow waterproof monitors, resuscitators, and a defibrillator. Holy fuck, but also thank God. I threw my empty Coke can in the pail under the gurney and took the stairs down to the cafeteria, in the basement.

Food servers with loose condoms on their heads stood behind a steam table draped with garlands of plastic fruit. Across the cafeteria, a red-faced guy in a necktie chewed in a trance; a garage attendant leafed through a heap of newspapers. At this end of the room, an elderly man in a lab coat with the large head of a New Hampshire politician avidly drew some kind of diagram for the young couple across the table. He seemed to be outlining a jailbreak.

I had two cups of coffee, a stack of pancakes, bacon, eggs, and a bran muffin. Two surgeons in their timeless pajamas wandered by with trays. The coffee made my feet sweat, and I took off my shoes and then my socks. Chewing, eating, I was alive! Then I put them back on and ran up six flights of stairs.

I opened the door to Kathy's room and sat lightly on the edge of her bed, careful not to crush her injuries. She'd slipped down a foot or so from where I'd left her, with the things still on her bosoms and the TV on in the dark. She looked washed out, bluish, and greasy. Her I.V. was beeping.

"She has your mouth," I said.

"That's nice."

"And your long, elegant feet."

"Aww." Kathy gazed at me. She was more relaxed than I'd ever seen her. The breast-pumping machine huffed beside her. Yellowish liquid drizzled into the bottles. It amounted to almost nothing.

I asked how she was feeling. She said the epidural hadn't worn off yet and she couldn't move her legs.

On the table next to her head was a handwritten list of baby stuff. I wrote down the brand name of a type of baby

ANGELS MAKING SNOW HUMANS

bottle the nurse said worked for preemies. Beneath that, I wrote the date and time of the baby's birth, and the weather. The last thing Kathy had written was "hats and booties in cheerful colors," and my eyes welled up. What else did we need?

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing." I folded the paper and put it away. "We've already got a lot of this coming from my brother."

She let her arm drop, and her head fell back as she lay there immobile, sighing. "When the baby gets out, I'm hiring a night nurse. You can pay for that."

I reached over and held a suction cup in place. The door banged open and a nurse came in.

Kathy grabbed the remote. "God, Darryl, how do I change the channel?"

The nurse gauged Kathy's post-op pain, gave her some Demerol, and left a bowl of vanilla ice cream.

Kathy reached for the ice cream, and I held both suction cups in place while she ate. Her breasts were as firm and round as the end of a baseball bat. She pulled the spoon out of her mouth, ice cream half eaten, and slid it back in. She was not herself. Normally, if I listened carefully, I could hear a sound coming out of her head like a humming refrigerator. Now there was nothing. It was the drugs, or the new sensations taking over, or the relief of knowing that the baby was safe. I put my shoulder on the pillow next to her and leaned my head back.

"Were you sleeping somewhere?"

"I was up in the NICU, I told you. I gave her a bottle."

She looked at me strangely. "Did something go wrong?"

"You mean with me?"

"Upstairs."

"I haven't slept in two days." I kept forgetting Kathy hadn't seen the baby yet, except for this Polaroid taped to the bed rail.

She picked up the remote again and pointed it at the TV. "You're very magnificent," she said calmly. On the screen, a famous singer was singing outdoors somewhere with a new haircut. "Were the nurses helpful?"

"Amazing."

"And you burped her when you finished?"

I said yes.

"And they weighed the poop?"

"Yes."

"What color was it?"

"Green."

"I just need a minute now with nobody inside me for once. Do you know what I mean? I need to have nobody in me or on me for a minute."

"Yes. Absolutely."

"Does that make me a terrible mother?"

I said no.

"I'm still sad I wasn't there. There are mothers who think the NICU is a day-care center. I'm not going to just lie here and let them do everything."

I was relieved to hear her say that. I'd hoped that she'd be a great mother, but I'd worried that she'd be a terrible mother, and I was looking for signs that she'd get off on the right foot.

"What's it like up there?"

"It's fine. I was just in the cafeteria, which is nice, although you wouldn't want those people running the NICU."

"Anyway, I'm glad you were there."

"I'm good with children."

"It's so important for a girl to have a good relationship with her father."

"Let me write that down."

"You'll be spending a lot more time with her than you thought."

"I have nine business days off, counting today."

"I hope that's O.K. with you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Once I can walk, I'll do everything."

"I've already factored in bonding with my own kid, F.Y.I." I stood and pushed the recliner back in place and straightened the blinds.

She explained how the brain developed, with neurons, specific ones, that were created when the father was around. "The presence of the biological father delays the onset of puberty. Having the father in close proximity."

"If we break up now, she turns into a slut."

"If we stay together, she can learn the clarinet."

I threw away newspapers and Styrofoam takeout boxes with old Caesar salad falling out of them, and slid the garbage can out into the hall. Then Kathy put in her earrings and I went down the hall and got a wheelchair.

We made our way to the elevator, Kathy holding her I.V. pole, me pushing the wheelchair. In the NICU, the nurses introduced themselves, moved furniture, rolled her up to the incubator, and put the baby in her arms. The neonatologist, a little round woman, arrived. "You can start breast-feeding any time you're ready," she said. "She might go for it."

"They said I could wait until tomorrow."

"Why don't you give it a try?"

Kathy opened her robe. The baby slid into her armpit. She grabbed her left breast and aimed it, as a nurse took hold of the baby's shoulders and pushed her closer, and the neonatologist forced the baby's chin down, to open her mouth. Already, it wasn't like on TV. Kathy landed her nipple near the baby's lips. The baby was asleep. Also, her head was at the wrong angle and wouldn't form a seal. The nurse turned the baby's shoulders, and I held the lower part of the baby and lined it up, as the neonatologist rubbed a warm washcloth over the baby's face to try to wake her. The baby woke for a second and moved her mouth, then passed out again. After a while, the neonatologist switched to a cold washcloth.

All we needed now was seven more people and we'd have enough for a hockey game.

"It isn't working," Kathy said finally.

Now what? We had to feed the baby what she was supposed to eat, every gram. Or we'd be stuck here, with a sickly kid on a feeding tube and a million drugs, not getting bigger, like Lizzie and her brother, in the next slot over.

I got some formula and shook it up and removed the baby from Kathy's arms, then put the rubber nipple to the roof of her mouth and held her upright, one hand cupping her head, a finger firmly under her chin, and she began to suck terrifically. The baby's tiny tomato face fell smushed against my thumb. Kathy sat there, her gaze going slack.

"Good job, good job," I said.

Kathy watched me, slumping a little. The baby ate, panting between swallows. Then she dropped off, a line of milk dribbling down her chin, and I pushed the nipple against the roof of her mouth once more and held it there. I kept the finger tight against her chin. The bottle was almost empty.

She coughed. The siren screeched. How long did it take for the two nurses manning the nurses' station to get out from behind it? I got to my feet and the breast-feeding pillow that had been around my waist fell to the ground. I took the bottle out of her mouth.

"Is that us?" Kathy asked. "Is that ours?"

I looked over the wires. The nurses stood on the other side of the cart. It was the kid next to us, Lizzie's brother. Kathy was somehow standing, her robe still open, her tits not put away.

"Watch his head," the nurse said.

"Come on, come on," the other nurse said. I held my barf towel over my kid to shield her from the noise. The boy recovered and the number went back to green.

Afterward, the nurses turned to the monitors and conferred. They touched buttons and asked each other questions.

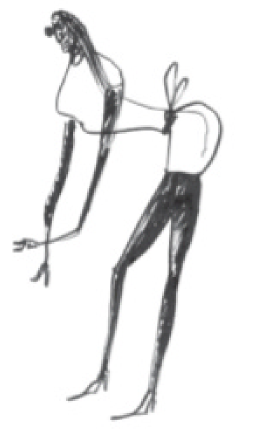
Then the first nurse stopped by and told us what to do if we heard our alarm. She read the record of apnea events on our chart, and showed us that our alarm had gone off an hour earlier, and twice the night before. I finished the feeding and wiped off the baby's chin and we exited, in defeat, to wait by the elevator.

"Oh, my God."

"They should've told us."

We went back two hours later and fed her again.

We were out of our gourds. We didn't know how much to worry. The baby was in there for two weeks. After a few days, they sent Kathy home to sleep, and we used the NICU like a day care, and at home I painted the little corner room, my former office, bright yellow, and threw out the old window shades. When we finally got the baby home, we brought the monitor, too, fourteen pounds, a shoulder-bag model, which we slept by and hauled around for the next month. In those days, we took pleasure in knowing that the people who pitied us were wrong. Our kid was like an old person living backward, dying a little less every day, trying to get up to zero. I slept downstairs with her, so Kathy could heal. In the morning, sunlight poured in, and the heat from the radiators made the curtains float. It was warm.



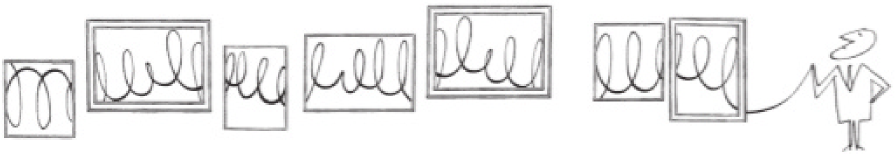
At first, anyway, having her home was its own triumph. It was almost easy. It was almost fun. When the alarm blasted, it was usually because the little sticky pads had come off, and I'd hold her and rock her and put her back to bed. Alone in the middle of the night, I discovered that, if I changed her diaper ahead of the feeding, she got so hungry she went nuts and ate too fast and puked. If I waited and changed her diaper after the feeding, she threw up from lying on her back.

At dawn, I was so relieved to see the sunrise, I'd stand beside her changing table, captivating her with show tunes, singing into her sock monkey as she stared up at me—"Oklahoma," which she loved, and "You've Got to Pick a Pocket or Two," from "Oliver!" This was before I figured out that if I hadn't started belting out songs at 5 A.M. she might've gone back to sleep. This was before I accidentally brushed my teeth with diaper cream.

I learned to switch on the music box and drop softly to the floor and crawl out of the room, evenly distributing my weight to keep the floor from creaking. I learned to ignore her screams and cork off, with a long splash of barf down my back, gauging the screams in my sleep—the buzz saw, the blood curdler—before getting up again and heading back in there. By then, her crying seemed ordinary and vindictive. I remember how, on one of those nights, I fed her two bottles and burped and changed her and cleaned her barf, and it took an hour and a half, but I couldn't soothe her, couldn't sit in a chair, kept feeling myself sliding, slumping over, so I put her back in the crib, still wailing. I defied her, and put a pillow over me and dreamed about her screaming, and finally picked her up roughly and brought her, flailing, into bed. She came to rest about an inch from my face. I turned and that's when I saw, with a shock, her eyes, as big as bocce balls, those puffy lips, how beautiful she was. I held and kissed her. She'd taken a break from screaming. I held her little cheeks and stared into her big brown eyes, and breathed while she breathed, telling her everything would be fine. In the morning, I found a blue bruise on her neck that I guess I'd given her the night before, but she'd already forgotten, or forgiven me. ♦

**NEWYORKER.COM**
Matthew Klam on new-parent madness.

# THE CRITICS



## BOOKS

# GREAT MATTER

*Hilary Mantel concludes her Tudor trilogy.*

BY DANIEL MENDELSOHN

In the opening pages of Hilary Mantel’s 1994 novel, “A Change of Climate,” a woman in a railway carriage stares disapprovingly at the cover of the cheesy paperback her travelling companion is reading. It’s clearly a work of historical fiction, the archly period title, “Wyfe to Crookback,” traced in “florid gold script.” (The “wyfe” in question is Anne Neville, unhappy queen to the legendarily hunchbacked Richard III.) Although the woman, Emma, is a physician, she evidently knows a thing or two about late-Plantagenet domestic architecture; as she examines the cover art, she notes that the manor house behind the heroine (“a svelte woman, with a small crown perched upon her wimple”) has “anachronistic chimney stacks.” The vulgar font, the clueless art work, even the “fat” paperback’s size, with its intimation of a future at the beach: all this is meant to indict the middlebrow taste of Emma’s fellow-passenger, Ginny, a posh neighbor who happens to be the wyfe of Emma’s lover.

Getting the past right—or wrong—has always been a theme in Mantel’s fiction, much of which features characters who, like Emma and Ginny, struggle to come to terms with histories they’d rather not talk about. But it’s hard, now, not to read the “Wyfe to Crookback” episode as being prophetic. From 1985, when she published her first book, until about ten years ago, Mantel earned admiration for a string of strikingly idiosyncratic works of fiction, most of them about modern people in contemporary settings, and for her numerous essays and reviews in publications like *The New York Review of Books*. But she achieved celebrity only after she committed herself to the genre and the period that she pokes fun at in that scene on the train. The publication, in 2009, of “Wolf Hall,” whose protagonist was Henry VIII’s brilliant consigliere, Thomas Cromwell, and of its sequel, “Bring Up the Bodies,” in 2012—a series that, with the release this week of “The Mirror and the Light” (Henry Holt), has become a trilogy—has brought Mantel a degree of popular success that is rare for authors of serious literary fiction. (The first two novels were adapted to great acclaim for both stage and television, further expanding her audience.) Anticipation for her latest Tudor offering has been running high: at a Waterstones bookstore in London last August, banners urging customers to preorder it were already fluttering above the shelves.

Such popularity has partly to do with the period itself. With its wild extremes—the high color and low motives, the befeathered courtiers and barbecued clerics, the oversexed kings and Virgin Queens, the (sometimes literally) outsized monarchs whose erotic whims or neuroses could trigger global crises—the Tudor era has exercised a powerful fascination on artistic imaginations for centuries. There have been tsunamis of novels, from Sir Walter Scott, in the early nineteenth century, and Jean Plaidy, in the mid-twentieth (“Katharine, the Virgin Widow,” “The Captive Queen of Scots,” etc.), to best-selling authors today such as Philippa Gregory or C. J. Sansom, whose lovelorn hero, a hunchbacked lawyer, solves mysteries emanating from the court of Henry VIII. Dramatizations have run the gamut from Friedrich Schiller’s 1800 verse drama “Maria Stuart,” about the conflict between the eponymous Queen of Scots and her cousin Elizabeth I—roles later coveted by Sarah Bernhardt, Bette Davis, Katharine Hepburn, Glenda Jackson, and Saoirse Ronan, to name just a few—to the glossy Netflix series “The Tudors,” in which Henry and his courtiers were impersonated by what appeared to be underwear models. There were even operas. The nineteenth-century Italian composer Gaetano Donizetti composed three: “Anna Bolena,” “Roberto Devereux,” and “Maria Stuarda.”

Because of Mantel’s literary bona fides, no one was likely to confuse her entries into this crowded field with the kind of stuff that the woman is reading on the train. But the question of how to approach historical fiction has clearly haunted the author. There’s a scene in “Wolf Hall” in which Cromwell, reminiscing about his shady past in Italy, recalls the time he scammed a gullible cardinal into buying a fake antique:

> “Well, we had a statue made, a smirking little god with wings, and then we beat it with hammers and chains to make it antique, and we hired a muleteer and drove it to Rome and sold it to a cardinal . . . I remember he had tears in his eyes when he paid us. ‘To think that on these charming little feet and these sweet pinions, the gaze of the Emperor Augustus may have rested.’ When the Portinari boys set off for Florence they were staggering under the weight of their purses.”
>
> “And you?”
>
> “I took my cut and stayed on to sell the mules.”

How do you make a new work feel old? In fiction, one way—what you

ABOVE: SERGE BLOCH

*Mantel's Thomas Cromwell finds it ever more difficult to extricate himself from the moral implications of his scheming.*

ILLUSTRATION BY CHLOE CUSHMAN

LIZ MONTAGUE

*"I said not to touch it."*

might call the Walter Scott approach—is to focus on exteriors, to dress things up with florid gold script and quaint period diction, with feathers, furbelows, and frills. Another way emerged in the mid-twentieth century, when Marguerite Yourcenar's "Memoirs of Hadrian" (1951) and Hermann Broch's dauntingly monumental exercise in stream of consciousness, "The Death of Virgil" (1945), brought a modernist interiority to the genre—and in so doing raised the fraught question of the extent to which a writer could enter into the mentality of the past. Those works, as many saw it, attained to the level of High Literature.

The ingenious way Mantel had, in the first two installments of the "Wolf Hall" trilogy, of making you feel as if you were eavesdropping on Cromwell's thoughts suggests that she's aligned herself with Yourcenar and Broch. But, if she didn't bother to beat her tale with hammers and chains, it was also because she had an agenda of her own. On close inspection, the books about Henry VIII and his world turned out to have been animated by the same themes and preoccupations that have been at the center of her work all along.

Starting with her début, the creepily effective black comedy "Every Day Is Mother's Day," about a put-upon young social worker faced with a disturbing case, it has been clear that Mantel is interested in the past. But the histories she explored tended to be the unhappy pasts that individuals and families so often try to suppress, usually unsuccessfully and sometimes with disastrous results. Unlike many in the boys' club of popular British authors, from Martin Amis to Kazuo Ishiguro, the younger Mantel, who until "Wolf Hall" was something of an outsider in the British literary establishment, chose to focus on a seamy, often ugly underside of English life: the grubby provinces, the crazy charwomen and delusional mediums, people and places with pasts worth fleeing. "But you have to put the past behind you, don't you?" a character asks rhetorically in "Vacant Possession," the sequel to "Every Day Is Mother's Day." "If it will let you," comes the response. In Mantel, it usually doesn't.

"A Change of Climate" wrenchingly dramatizes this theme. Set in the nineteen-eighties, it unfolds the story of a British couple, Anna and Ralph Eldred, who were the victims of a horrific act of violence when they were newlyweds working for a missionary society in southern Africa, in the fifties—a crime triggered when Anna carelessly offends an employee. (Mantel enjoys contrasting our desire to do good with the limits of our ability to comprehend the "others" whom we want to help.) Now back in England, the Eldreds never mention what happened, but the apparently normal and useful lives they lead—Ralph runs a family charity—are riven by fissures through which their past suffering rises to the surface, like a poisonous vapor, threatening to destroy the equilibrium they thought they'd achieved.

As for inauthenticity and inaccuracies, the misrepresentations that Mantel likes to expose aren't of the anachronistic-chimney-stack kind. What interests her are the half-truths, evasions, and self-delusions that people cling to, often at great cost, in order to get through their (usually grim) lives. In "Every Day Is Mother's Day," the social worker comes to see how her colleagues have chosen to delude themselves about the nature of the suffering and evil that they witness. At the center of these books stands an unsettlingly opaque figure, a mentally disturbed young woman named Muriel. At once malevolent and victimized, she represents another favorite theme of Mantel's: the presence in life of an irreducible core of pain and unreason that resists any genial assumptions about the coherence or redeemability of the world. "I thought there was order in the world, at least—a kind of progress, a meaning, a pattern," Ralph Eldred reflects in "A Change of Climate," speaking for many of the author's characters. "But where is the pattern now?"

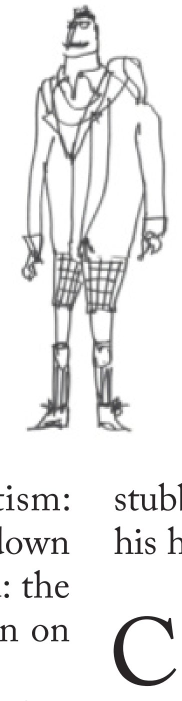
Small wonder that Mantel has returned so often to the supernatural—ghosts, in particular. In many of her novels, the border between reality and unreality, sanity and madness, is as fuzzy as the one between past and present, truth and lies. (Muriel's mother abuses her because she thinks she's saving the girl from evil spirits that inhabit their house.) Sometimes this shadow world of lurking evil turns out to be explicable. In "Eight Months on Ghazzah Street" (1988), Frances, an Englishwoman who has accompanied her engineer husband to Saudi Arabia, finds herself a virtual prisoner in their apartment complex, where whispered comings and goings on the stairs and in the hallways provoke a growing paranoia in her, a "feeling that something is going on, just outside her range of vision." Her conviction that she has detected a criminal cabal operating out of the apartment upstairs is questioned by everyone around her until the truth explodes, with devastating results. Frances is one of a number of Mantel's female characters who must struggle to make themselves believed.

In other works, the border between natural and supernatural collapses under the pressure of unreason and suffering. In what may be Mantel's masterpiece, "Beyond Black" (2005), a creamily luscious prose stands in disconcerting contrast to the bizarrenesses and horrors it narrates. Its protagonist is Alison, a morbidly obese medium who has to contend with some very real spirits, in particular a band of thugs led by a ghoul called Morris, who likes to lounge around her room playing with his fly. The irrepressible dead torment her as mercilessly now as they did when they were alive: when Alison was a child, we learn, they raped and tortured her. Mantel's ghosts embody the histories that we can't bury.

In an interview, Mantel referred with startling matter-of-factness to the presence of ghosts in her own life: "When I was a child I believed our house was haunted, and so—worryingly—did the grown-ups." In a 2003 memoir called, unsurprisingly, "Giving Up the Ghost," she writes of how, when she was seven, she witnessed something uncanny in the yard behind the family home: a ripple in the fabric of the afternoon, a disturbance in the atmosphere that, to her mind, had to do with "the nature of evil." The recurrent figure of the ghost in Mantel's works bridges two paramount themes: the lingering presence of the pasts we would forget, and the opacity of the evils, impervious to sense and impossible to "pattern," that we suffer in the present. The darkness of her themes and the rebarbative strangeness of the narratives in which she clothed them may not have won her international fandom, but they bespeak a genuine and bracing originality.

Astonished helplessness in the presence of unreason and cruelty was what brought Mantel to the genre with which she is most closely identified today. In "Giving Up the Ghost," she details the sufferings inflicted on her not only by the ignorant and vindictive nuns who taught her as a child, but also, later in life, by a long line of doctors who failed to take seriously a devastating chronic illness. Starting in her early adolescence, Mantel displayed symptoms of what turned out to be a severe case of endometriosis, a condition in which cells that normally appear inside the uterus grow outside it, causing crippling pain. Her symptoms were dismissed initially as psychosomatic or signs of a psychiatric illness. (Treated with antipsychotic drugs, she later experienced psychotic episodes.) It wasn't until she was in her twenties, when she did her own research and diagnosed the problem, that proper treatment began.

At university, Mantel studied law, and in her memoir she writes of having developed an interest in the question of where "the powers of the state begin and end." During her illness, she read extensively about the French Revolution and found in that history an external correlative to experiences she understood all too well from her time in school and in the clinics. "I began to read about the old regime, its casual cruelties, its heartless style," she writes. "I thought, but I know this stuff. By nature, I knew about despotism: the unratified decisions, handed down from the top, arbitrarily enforced: the face of strength when it moves in on the weak."



From that epiphany resulted the first novel that Mantel wrote, in 1979. (It wasn't published until 1992.) "A Place of Greater Safety" is a work of historical fiction that entwines the lives of three leaders of the Revolution—Georges Danton, Camille Desmoulins, and Maximilien Robespierre—from their childhoods until their early deaths at the hands of the movement they created. Mantel has recalled of her research, "I had pressed the juice of meaning from every scrap of paper . . . every note on every source," but the book's more than seven hundred pages suggest that she hadn't yet figured out how to balance "history" and "fiction." Among other things, her characters too often do what characters in historical fiction are, mortifyingly, forced to do, which is to emblematize or give voice to entire currents in history or thought. ("Free thought, free speech—is that too much to ask?")

What Mantel needed, but hadn't yet found, was a historical period and a historical figure that could serve, naturally and organically, as vehicles for further exploring the themes she'd always been interested in. Where is the boundary between truth and lies? Where does the power of the state begin and end? Is it possible to break away from the past, and, if so, to what extent? How does the conflict between a modern trust in reason, on the one hand, and primitive ignorance and irrationality, on the other, play out in the lives of individuals and of nations?

As it turned out, she needn't have strayed to Paris to find an apt topic. For—as the world knows by now—the hero of the work she embarked on after she published "Beyond Black" is Cromwell, the innovative statesman who helped drag England from the Plantagenet Middle Ages into the early modern era, remaking it as a bureaucratic state while battling entrenched class privilege and religious fanaticism: a man who tried to maneuver between ambitious ideals and stubbornly irrational realities and lost his head doing so.

Critics reviewing the first two novels were unanimous in their admiration for how "utterly modern" they felt, the way in which they conjured a "powerful hallucination of presence." Although Mantel occasionally deploys archaic diction ("gralloched") or syntax ("no man shall have a fowl in his pot but he pay a levy on it") to suggest an antique milieu, for the most part the books feel so contemporary because their style, their themes, and their hero are, in fact, manifestly modern. At the office, Cromwell hatches an F.D.R.-like plan to use government spending on public works as a means of elevating the lower classes. (To no avail: "Parliament cannot see how it is the state's job to create work," he bitterly reflects.) At home, he's just another successful middle-aged businessman, fussing over the details of Christmas festivities, lavishing gifts of jewelry on his wife and nieces, and—he was a garmento at one point—guessing the cost of someone's outfit to the nearest shilling.

By means of deftly interwoven flashbacks, "Wolf Hall" traces the astonishing rise from lowly origins that helps make Cromwell an appealing protagonist for today's audiences, a hero of glass-ceiling-shattering mobility. The son of a commoner, perhaps a blacksmith or a brewer, he was born probably around 1485, the year in which "Crookback" was defeated at the Battle of Bosworth Field by Henry VIII's father—the event that ended the centuries-old Plantagenet dynasty and brought the Tudors to power. The teenage Cromwell left home—some say to escape his violent father—and spent a number of years on the Continent, in Antwerp and Italy, where he learned about banking and trade. This education would help him nudge England away from the chivalric and feudal mindset of the medieval world and into the modern one, which, as Mantel has him think, is run "not from castle walls, but from countinghouses."

"Wolf Hall" and "Bring Up the Bodies" embraced many of the author's long-standing preoccupations. Each volume elegantly mirrored the other's structure, a symmetry that foregrounded the ironies of history and the complexities of Mantel's Cromwell. In the end, he's yet another of her characters who's trying to impose a pattern on chaos.

The two books have the same basic plot: Cromwell's ascent to ever-greater positions of power is contrasted with the downward trajectory of a queen against whom he connives. "Wolf Hall" tells the story of the ambitious minister's scheme to bring down Henry's first wife, Catherine of Aragon, who, after a quarter century of marriage, hadn't borne the King a male heir—a crisis known as "the King's Great Matter." Catherine was set aside in 1533 in favor of Anne Boleyn, a move that necessitated England's break from the Roman Church, which had refused to annul the King's marriage to Catherine. A touching element of that first installment is an evocation of Cromwell's loyalty to his beloved mentor, Cardinal Wolsey, the Lord Chancellor who fell from Henry's favor for failing to achieve what his protégé eventually did.

"Bring Up the Bodies" raised the moral stakes and complicated the reader's perception of Henry's Lord Privy Seal—one of the many lofty titles that Cromwell eventually earned. Here, Cromwell smoothly engineers the downfall of the woman he'd gone to such efforts to see crowned. (Anne, it turned out, couldn't produce a male heir, either.) Mantel skillfully sifts the immense and confusing historical record, finding moments that spotlight the moral cynicism that so often serves power. In "Wolf Hall," the King's ministers get wind of a rumor that, before she caught Henry's eye, Anne had "pre-contracted" a marriage to a nobleman named Henry Percy—a quasi-legal arrangement that threatened the validity of her planned marriage to the King; Cromwell is shown bullying Percy into swearing an oath asserting that the pre-contract never existed. In "Bring Up the Bodies," when Henry needs to get rid of Anne, Cromwell once again tracks down poor Percy, this time in order to intimidate him into retracting that oath—a hypocrisy at which Percy, to his credit, balks: "You made me a liar as I stood before God. Now you want to make me a fool as I stand before men."

In Mantel's presentation of Cromwell, this is all in a day's work: a bookworm who reads Machiavelli, he doesn't let niggling ethical and moral considerations get in the way of his prince's grand agenda. The author's early interest in the law bears fruit in a number of scenes in "Bring Up the Bodies" in which Cromwell is shown putting his legal and rhetorical talents to unsavory use. (Not content to rely on Percy, he and his associates levelled charges of treasonous adultery against the Queen and half a dozen courtiers, including her own brother.) Throughout the trilogy, there's a chilling pleasure in observing Cromwell as he weaves verbal webs around his hapless prey. "You have no proof," one of his aristocratic enemies incredulously exclaims during an interrogation. "All you allege is words, words, words." But words are enough to make heads roll.

The fall of another character provided Mantel with a vehicle for revisiting an old theme. At the time of the split from Catherine and Rome, Henry's Lord Chancellor was the scholar, theologian, and statesman Sir Thomas More, who was eventually executed for protesting the new religious and political arrangements that Cromwell effected. (The Catholic Church rewarded More with a sainthood.) In the acclaimed 1960 play "A Man for All Seasons"—later an Oscar-winning movie—More's story was dramatized as a parable about heroic conscience speaking truth to brute power. But Mantel resists this appealing if sentimental interpretation. She makes More a symbol of a doctrinaire pre-modern mentality that baffles the forward-thinking Cromwell. During an imaginary conversation with More, he wonders:

> Why does everything you know, and everything you've learned, confirm you in what you believed before? Whereas in my case, what I grew up with, and what I thought I believed, is chipped away a little and a little, a fragment then a piece and then a piece more. With every month that passes, the corners are knocked off the certainties of this world: and the next world too.

The next world: something else that Mantel does well in these books is to evoke the urgency of the theological and spiritual controversies of the era, which could well confound readers in a secular age. You never doubt why so many of her characters are willing to burn at the stake. (Her interest in religion and madness comes in handy here.) But, for the pragmatist Cromwell, whom she carefully portrays as being allergic to ideological extremes, such gestures are repugnant. "They deserve each other, these mules that pass for men," he muses apropos of More and More's great enemy, the Protestant William Tyndale, whose insistence on translating the Bible into English ended up sending him to the pyre.

There's something familiar about the cruelly efficient machinery of state intimidation that Cromwell is shown operating so brilliantly. King Henry emerges as an all too recognizable type, a vain and unbalanced autocrat whose dangerously mercurial desires have to be managed by his skillful minister. And Cromwell often puts you in mind not so much of Machiavelli's cool Realpolitik in the sixteenth century as of Stalin's warped jurisprudence in the twentieth. "He needs guilty men," Mantel's hero thinks, as he hounds Anne's alleged lovers into confessing. "So he has found men who are guilty. Though perhaps not guilty as charged."

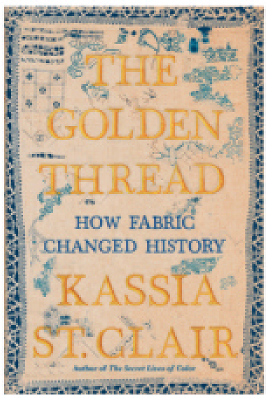
And yet Mantel slyly works to keep him sympathetic. (She's not the first historical novelist to fall for her subject; older readers might think of Mary Renault and Alexander the Great.) To the end, Cromwell is presented as a flawed idealist. He is a distant cousin of one of the characters in "A Change of Climate," who ruefully observes that "we set out with high ideals. . . . The things we wanted have not happened."

Taken together, those first two volumes function as a dark diptych, a portrait of an increasingly haunted man who finds it ever more difficult to extricate himself from the moral implications of his sophisticated political maneuvering. From other things, too: he occasionally suspects that, as high as he has risen, he may be more like his thuggish father than he likes to admit—another past that proves inescapable.

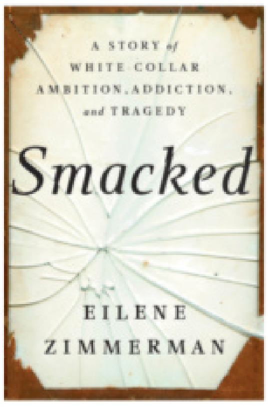
"Bring Up the Bodies" ends in the summer of 1536, just after Anne's beheading and Henry's marriage to his third wife, Jane Seymour. That leaves the short but eventful remainder of Cromwell's life still to be narrated. He was executed in July, 1540, for treason and heresy, after his enemies among the old nobility succeeded in convincing the ever more paranoid Henry that he was aiming to depose him and take the throne.

"The Mirror and the Light" does cover those years, but the tightly symmetrical trajectories that organized the first two volumes and generated their morals and meanings have gone. This book has to embrace a concatenation of major events, any one of which could

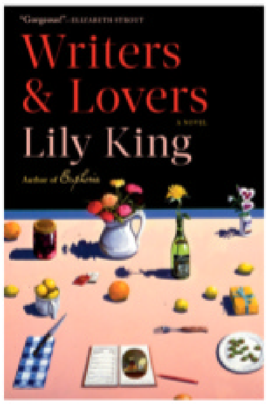
# BRIEFLY NOTED



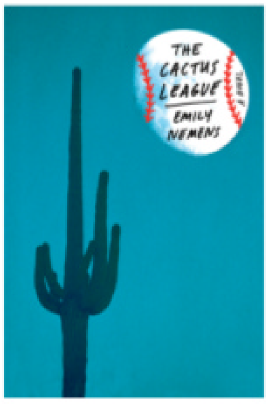
**The Golden Thread**, *by Kassia St. Clair (Liveright)*. In an enlivening history of fabric, St. Clair takes aim at those who trivialize the study of clothing. "We live surrounded by cloth," she writes. "We are swaddled in it at birth and shrouds are drawn over our faces in death." Rather than a broad overview, St. Clair provides a cleverly structured patchwork of vignettes spanning the eras and the continents: Paleolithic bast threads excavated in a cave in Georgia; the patterns of ancient China's silks ("mirrored flower," "nimble waves"); the inflatable rubber-and-nylon suits that weighed down Mercury astronauts as they journeyed into space. Her descriptions of textiles and the people who created and wore them are sensual and even moving.



**Smacked**, *by Eilene Zimmerman (Random House)*. Opening with the author's discovery of the body of her ex-husband, Peter, a fifty-one-year-old corporate attorney in San Diego, this memoir explores the factors that have led to a precipitous increase in so-called white-collar addiction in the United States. Peter's addiction was unknown to his family, friends, and colleagues, until an autopsy found cocaine and opioids in his system. Zimmerman charts a startling rise in anxiety and depression among even the youngest professionals, attributing it to a toxic blend of ultracompetitiveness, workaholism, and isolation from family and the wider community. The corresponding spike in drug use underscores the book's central message: that a reformation of "inhumane" corporate culture is urgently needed.



**Writers & Lovers**, *by Lily King (Grove)*. The narrator of this novel is a thirty-one-year-old writer beset with student debt, living in an adapted potting shed in Boston, and laboring over her début. Distractions from work include grief (her mother died suddenly while abroad) and a choice between two men, both writers themselves. One is young and unreliable but irresistible; the other is older and established and has children, something she craves. "It's always a choice between fireworks and coffee in bed," an acquaintance tells her. The love-triangle plot proves to be a nimble vehicle for exploring the book's true subject—overcoming, and making art from, hardship.



**The Cactus League**, *by Emily Nemens (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)*. An ode to baseball, this début novel, by the editor of *The Paris Review*, unfolds across nine "innings," told from several perspectives. During spring training, in Scottsdale, the superstar left fielder of a Los Angeles team, struggling with a divorce, becomes involved with a "cleat chaser," whose charms draw him into a drunken incident at Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin West house. When his handlers attempt damage control, it emerges that his problems go deeper. As Nemens portrays the life of the team—a pitcher is in thrall to pain pills; players' wives hold a lingerie party—it starts to seem almost an organism, each constituent part brushing against others in a larger story of competition, survival, and obsession.

be the matter of an entire novel. We get the popular uprising known as the Pilgrimage of Grace; the brief queenship of Jane Seymour, the birth of her son, the future Edward VI, and her death soon afterward; the selection of the German princess Anne of Cleves as Henry's fourth wife, a match that was urged by Cromwell in part because of his desire to move England closer to the Protestant German states—and whose failure was to doom Cromwell himself. (Some things even he couldn't manipulate: the King found Anne physically distasteful, and the marriage was annulled.) Henry's unhappiness with the whole affair was a turning point in his relations with his chief minister, whose fall from power occupies the final section of the novel.

No surprise, then, that the new book—seven hundred and fifty-four pages long, complete with a seven-page list of the dramatis personae—is Mantel's longest yet. Unfortunately, it's beyond even her skill to hold these disparate happenings together, and the result is a bloated and only occasionally captivating work.

To be sure, this huge canvas, expertly painted as always, offers many of the pleasures you've come to expect of Mantel and her Cromwell books. These include stretches of sumptuous prose; something about the Tudor milieu has brought greater amplitude and gorgeousness to Mantel's style. Throughout, there are swoony passages that—like certain Dutch paintings of the century after Cromwell's—exult in cataloguing the material richness of a society newly confident in itself: the food and the fabrics, the jewels and the spices, the meats, the tapestries, the wines. As the narrative of Cromwell's final years moves closer to its inevitable conclusion, and as he pauses ever more frequently to consider his achievements, this opulent style comes to color Mantel's evocation of his autumnal thoughts:

> He too is guilty of retrospection as the light fades, in that hour in winter or summer before they bring in the candles, when earth and sky melt, when the fluttering heart of the bird on the bough calms and slows, and the night-walking animals stir and stretch and rouse, and the eyes of cats shine in the dark, when colour bleeds from sleeve and gown into the darkening air; when the page grows dim and letter forms elide and slip into other conformations, so that as the page is turned the old story slides from sight and a strange and slippery confluence of ink begins to flow. You look back into your past and say, is this story mine . . . ?

Throughout "The Mirror and the Light," you feel the effort of the author's attempts to stop that story sliding from her grip. A structure implicit in the history of Cromwell's final years is one that literature has loved to exploit, and Mantel tries hard to make it work. If, in the first two books, the protagonist's trajectory was an upward one, the arc in the third is the old Greek one that goes from hubris to nemesis. Although it's highly unlikely that Cromwell ever intended to depose Henry, as his accusers maintained, Mantel effectively suggests the way in which, as time passed and Henry became increasingly erratic, his minister may well have become dangerously overconfident. (By the end of the trilogy, the King—"a man of great endowments, lacking only in consistency, reason and sense"—has come to embody the irrational forces that Cromwell has always tried to combat and that Mantel has always probed.)

One way to think of the book's title is, indeed, to see it as illustrating a fatal confusion: Cromwell, the mirror, has mistaken himself for the light, which can only be Henry. Again and again, Cromwell will let slip a remark that reveals the perilous delusion that he is indispensable to his prince. "I should not have let the king get in my way," he remarks of some plan that had come undone. "My lord," a shocked associate retorts, "the king is not in our way. He *is* our way." Such offhand remarks will come back to haunt him, twisted and used against him just as he has twisted the innocent words of others.

The hubris theme is too intermittent, too submerged beneath the exhausting accumulation of events and details, to make things cohere. Other tactics fall short, too. As the book reaches its climax, there is a feverish increase of flashbacks to Cromwell's childhood—many of which, such as recollections of his father's vicious beatings, repeat incidents familiar from the previous installments, presumably in order to create echoes and parallels that will give some kind of shape to this mass. (There are even ghosts: Thomas More hovers, as does a talkative Wolsey. The past is never past.) But the gesture fails, and the repetitions feel merely repetitive.

By the time you get to Cromwell's execution—a brilliantly imagined moment, and perhaps the best single scene here—the incidents and details, all no doubt with some basis in history, have overwhelmed any discernible pattern. I found my attention wandering more than once as I made my way through an elaborate description of a court entertainment, a subplot involving an anonymous gift to Cromwell of a leopard, and a visit to baby Elizabeth, who's cranky because she's teething; and even started to wonder—a thought unimaginable during my reading of the first two books—whether this particular historical figure really merits nearly two thousand pages of fiction.

Toward the end of "Every Day Is Mother's Day," there's a charged moment in which Isabel, the social worker, learns that someone wants to write a novel based on the disturbed Muriel's case file; astonished, she wonders aloud how and why anyone would want to do so. "But it's not a story," she protests, "it's just what people do. It's just a record of what they do." History, too, in one view, is the record of what people have done: Richard Crookback, Thomas Cromwell, Henry VIII, Anne Boleyn. The final installment of the "Wolf Hall" trilogy is a reminder that a history is not the same as a story. I suspect that Mantel had already said everything she had to say about Thomas Cromwell in the first two books, but felt compelled—by her evident love for the character; perhaps, too, by the appetite of her audience for more—to doggedly follow the historical trail to its conclusion.

But, for all the additional events it relates, nothing in "The Mirror and the Light" is really new—or, I should say, really "novel." The great quantity of matter here will no doubt satisfy fans of both the Tudors and Mantel; but since when was that the point? If an author has told a tale well, given it a firm shape and delineated its themes, brought its hero sufficiently to life to leave an indelible impression, she's done her job. Everything else is just words, words, words. ♦

BOOKS

# A LONE STAR

*Fame and family in Anne Enright's "Actress."*

BY SARAH RESNICK

*Enright's latest narrator must reckon with her mother's celebrity.*

ILLUSTRATION BY ANJA SLIBAR

Partway through "Actress" (W. W. Norton), Anne Enright's captivating seventh novel, the narrator, Norah, advances a theory about her mother's rise to fame. Katherine O'Dell, who died at the age of fifty-eight, the same age her daughter is now, was a grande dame of the Irish theatre. Her four-decade-long career, which began in the nineteen-forties, brought her to Broadway, to Hollywood, to avant-garde productions of Bertolt Brecht and Samuel Beckett. This ascendance, Norah insists, was instantaneous. "A star is born not made," she aphorizes. "Whatever a star has, they had it all along."

This notion has a charming simplicity. In the face of celebrity's special incandescence, perhaps there is no need for an origin story of mundanities like talent and hard work. But these days the taxonomy of the famous has been expanding ever downward (we have a Z-list now), and Norah's formulation collapses under scrutiny. Of course stars are made: it takes connections or coincidences or both to find your way to the top—and publicity to stay there. This is part of why we have always found celebrities so transfixing. "The whole media construction of stars encourages us to think in terms of 'really,'" Richard Dyer wrote in "Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society," his classic study of celebrity, from 1986. "Really" as in, What is she *really* like? It's the simultaneity of constructed persona and real person that draws us in.

For Norah, this paradox persists even twenty-five years after her mother's death. A married novelist with two grown children—that is, with stories of her own—she is still drawn to the story of Katherine O'Dell's making. She isn't the only one: Norah gets an e-mail, and then a visit, from a young doctoral student who is writing a dissertation that will offer her view of what Katherine was really like. The student promises to engage with the actress's "radical subjectivity," to "de-iconise her and show her as an agent in the world." She wants to know about things like Katherine's "sexual style."

Norah doesn't want to think about these things; she suspects that they say more about the student than they do about Katherine O'Dell. If fame is a mirror, for Norah the task of parsing resemblance is especially complicated. Hours after the student leaves, Norah is still sulking about the cannibalization of her mother's story. Her husband, no longer able to mask his irritation, asks, "Why don't you write it yourself?" Norah, who has published five novels, has yet to write the book she "needed to write," the one "that was shouting to be written." The following morning, she buys a ticket to London, where Katherine was born, and begins her accounting.

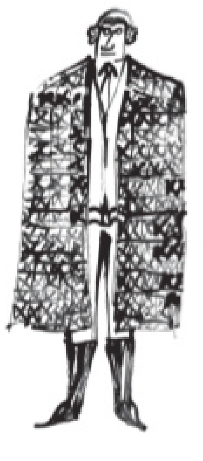
Enright, who is Irish, is drawn to stories about troubled families. In "The Gathering" (2007), her fourth novel, which won the Man Booker Prize, the restless narrator returns home for her brother's wake and tries to make sense of his suicide. "The Green Road" (2015) tells of the Madigan clan, their fortunes and misfortunes over the course of three decades. At the center of these households are mothers who are headstrong, capricious, impossible to please. (In both books, a daughter gives her mother an expensive scarf, only to be cruelly rebuffed.)

Norah and Katherine form another tragic mother-daughter pair—their tragedy heightened by their proximity to the stage. We are told from the start that Katherine's drama will end in a mental institution, after a strange and salacious incident in which she shoots a well-known producer in the foot. And yet Katherine is also the heroine of Norah's story; the two are close, loving, in a way that Enright's other mother-daughter pairs are not. "I want to think that nothing between us two ever went wrong," Norah says. They sit together on the sofa for whole evenings at a time. "She put a cushion on her lap for my head," Norah recalls, "and we smoked from the same pack, as though smoking were some kind of occupation." Katherine travels often, and her reunions with her daughter are "astounding, joyous affairs, with dancing and presents."

But Norah can't be sure where the actress ends and her mother begins. Katherine, she says, was a star "not just on screen or on the stage, but at the breakfast table also." The scene at home, as Norah describes it, has the clichéd perfection of a movie set: "The sun is coming through the window, the smoke from her cigarette rises and twists in an elegant, double strand." Her mother makes toast with marmalade, then takes three, maybe four bites. To signal that she has finished, she does a "little wavy-over thing" with her hand. Afterward, she might pick up the receiver of the beige wall-mounted phone, or natter on to young Norah, or to the ceiling, or to the dog waiting under the table for crumbs. There is always an audience. When Norah is thirteen, her grandfather dies, and Katherine breaks the news to her "like a good mother," caressing her hair and asking if she's O.K. "She did it all so perfectly," Norah says. "I did not think, for a single second, that she might adore him the way that I adored her." If Katherine was only playing the role of parent, who was she—*really*?

Katherine O'Dell, we are told, made her first appearance onstage at the age of ten. She played a crocus. When, in 1939, the war came to England, her parents—successful but itinerant stage actors—moved the family to Ireland. Eight years later, Katherine was back in London, débuting in a play in the West End. The show was a wild success. The following year, now in New York, she was reborn as an Irishwoman. Her accent, like her bottle-red hair and the apostrophe in her name, was part of a carefully constructed fake. It was her agent's idea. "You are in America," he told her. "You can be anything you want to be."

If the story of Katherine's rise contains at least some element of mystery, the story of her decline is relatively straightforward. Like the careers of countless actresses, its arc has everything to do with age, and, of course, with sexism. "In those days, when a woman hit thirty she went home and shut the door," Norah says. Katherine stars in a hit film in L.A., but within a year she is pregnant out of wedlock and forced to retreat from the public eye. She gives birth to Norah in Brooklyn, then travels incognito with her daughter back to Ireland, where the rest of her career will take place on the stage. (Norah is never told who her father is. Compared to the story of Katherine's rise, the question of her origins strikes Norah as uninteresting.) Katherine discovers that her fame and desirability have already peaked. She is only twenty-six.



The mother's life is unravelling just as the daughter's is taking shape. As Norah chronicles Katherine's experiences, we learn, intermittently, of her own. She writes about unremarkable boyfriends and true loves, about the trauma of sexual violence and the boredom of middle-aged marriage. The scenes spool ahead into the future and back into the past: she grows up in Dublin, buys a house by the sea, can't afford to heat it. The voice Enright conjures for Norah is lissome and intimate. She has an eye for the unexpected and exacting image: the British Embassy in 1972, days after Bloody Sunday, "the roof just a few blackened beams against a wet sky"; the funeral of her mother's longtime housekeeper, in the mid-nineties, the family dressed in coats of "the same lilac-coloured polyester." These images are associative and digressive, the way memory is. The story is easy to follow but difficult to reconstruct. But that may be part of Enright's point. Making a narrative out of the inchoate past inevitably entails selection—and perhaps some level of deception.

In charging her narrator with the task of excavation, Enright revisits the premise she used in "The Gathering." Veronica, an affluent homemaker, tries to reconstruct her brother's life after his suicide; like Norah, she wants to write it all down. She thinks she knows when things began to go wrong for him, but to explain it she needs to look further back, to before either of them was born. Veronica's story is made up mostly of what she cannot know; she reimagines what did take place or invents what might have. Even events from her lifetime are cast in doubt. Of the turning point she has identified in her brother's life, she admits, "I am not sure if it really did happen."

But Norah is a different kind of narrator, her mother a different kind of subject. Fame leaves a material trail in its wake. Norah visits the National Library to review her mother's papers, cites photographs and newspaper clippings and Pathé newsreels. But documentary evidence contains its own fictions. Norah's twenty-first-birthday party is preserved in a photograph in a newspaper spread: mother and daughter in a jolly crowd, leaning in around a cake. Images like these purport to be a record of spontaneity; we call them candids. But "it was all staged," Norah says. Still, she finds that only when her mother is frozen in time can she bring her into focus. "The picture was such a fake," she says. "But the years have made it somehow true."

Are we reading the book that Norah's husband urged her to claim as her own? Enright doesn't say: the only evidence of a completed work is the pages in our hands. Every so often, the novel shifts into the second person. The addressee is Norah's husband. In these sections, the mood is warm and tender, and Enright shows herself to be a

*"You can leave now. I really just needed you to unzip me."*

careful observer of long-term monogamy—its uneven tempo, its alternating major and minor keys. "Even though I have dragged you from your dream, you are pleased to see me there," Norah says, of waking her husband up in the morning. "It feels like forgiveness, every time."

But her view of marriage is also unvarnished. "There were times," she says, "whole years, perhaps—when you annoyed me, in one way or another." She and her husband have blamed each other for their respective failures, witnessed each other's bodies sag with age. It's a candor that Norah struggles to seize when describing her relationship with her mother, and its effect is to render marital love more real and, in turn, all the more profound. With her husband she has built a relationship grounded in authenticity, a kind of anti-celebrity experience.

"Actress" moves toward the moment of Katherine's desperate assault. The man she shoots is the "movie impresario" Boyd O'Neill; he survives, though he never quite heals. She has been working on a script, but when she offers it to O'Neill, he sends it off to be rewritten, cutting her out of the process. The aftermath of the crime has the air of another performance. Dragged away by the police, Katherine speaks in a "pretend language for two hours, interspersed with some phrases and slogans used by Republican elements." Once she has been found guilty and sent to an asylum, the real Katherine seems to disappear completely, as if she never existed at all. "Most of the time," Norah writes, "she was—I don't know how to explain it—only incidentally my mother."

It's impossible not to observe this episode's resonances with the broader reckoning taking place around issues of gendered power and powerlessness. In a recent essay on the men of #MeToo, Enright wrote of friends who, in conversations about inappropriate encounters with influential men, especially at work, spoke of feeling that "what was violated was not their body, but their gift." Katherine, it seems, might say something similar of her experiences, in which her talent and ambition were marred by men more powerful than she was. But it would also be a mistake to reduce the novel to a parable of women's empowerment by way of revenge. Being treated badly by men does not, in Enright's telling, grant women carte blanche to mete out justice.

The doctoral student who visits Norah stokes her rage in part because she wants to make Katherine into a feminist hero. What her mother did to O'Neill was "very wrong," Norah says. "She turned him into a fantasy, and then she attacked this fantasy," blaming him for a lifetime's worth of injuries. For Norah, who, above all, treasures authenticity, perhaps this is an essential crime: "Boyd was a real person, made of flesh and blood," Norah says. Was her mother too fake to understand?

Toward the end of the novel, Norah has a recurring dream. In it, she finds a storage unit with her "mother's 'performance,' whatever that might mean" inside. It contains autographed paraphernalia and many awards, "big lumps of glass or metal, heavy and often pointed, one of them so vicious we put it out in the shed for fear someone might get themselves impaled." Norah wakes from these dreams to the truth that most of her mother's belongings have been given away, sold, or tossed in the trash. She goes in search of one of her mother's props—a ring she called her "black emerald," a relic from her Hollywood days—as if to prove that Katherine is not just a dream, or a myth.

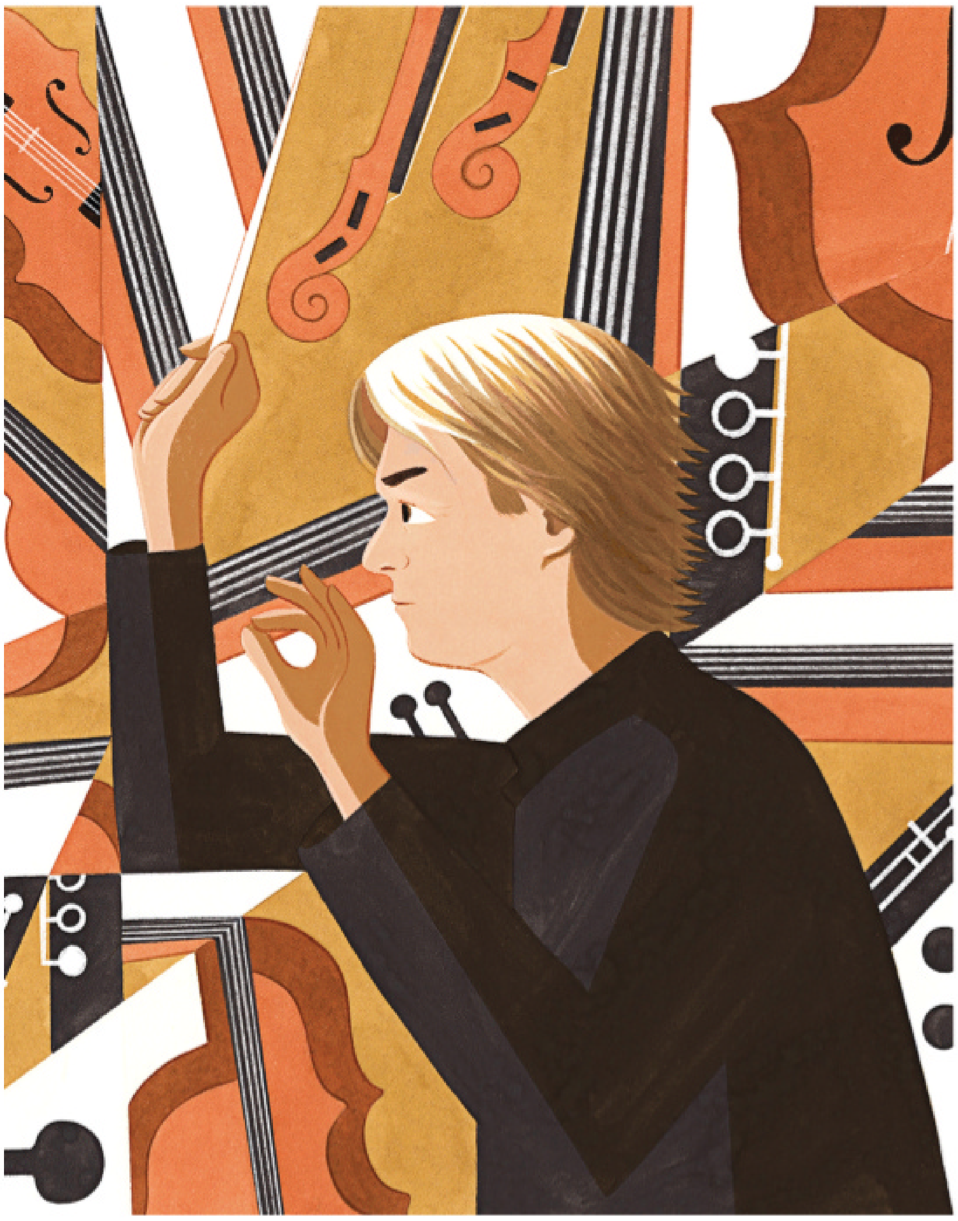
Norah knows she put the ring "somewhere safe," but now she can't remember where that is. Recalling all the "vital and very small" objects that her daughter, Pamela, had stashed away as a child—nail scissors, a single shoelace—she wanders into Pamela's bedroom, rummages through her drawers and coat pockets. She doesn't really expect to find the ring, but she stays in the room a little longer: she has retreated from the space of her mother's performance and found something real. She texts her daughter, and their brief but sweet exchange—Pamela sends two heart emojis—forces Norah to sit on the bed to let her "love for her settle back down." In this short scene, in the midst of loss, we glimpse how much she has gained: a bond with her own daughter that is perhaps sturdier, and truer, than anything she knew with Katherine O'Dell. ♦

### MUSICAL EVENTS

# STRANGE INTERLUDE

*The L.A. Philharmonic revisits the music of the Weimar Republic.*

BY ALEX ROSS



*Esa-Pekka Salonen likes to isolate a pivotal moment and space in musical history.*

In modern discourse, the term "Weimar Republic" conjures a lurid host of associations, few of them related to the stately old German ducal city of Weimar. One thinks, instead, of the mythical Berlin of the nineteen-twenties: dance halls, cabarets, the sexual underground, street fighting among Communists and Nazis, the clash between a decadent liberation and a decadent counterreaction. The complex reality of the Weimar era, which lasted from 1918 to 1933, is filtered through popular reimaginings: Christopher Isherwood's "Berlin Stories"; the musical and the film "Cabaret," based on Isherwood; revivals of "The Threepenny Opera"; and, most recently, the television series "Babylon Berlin." It is easily forgotten that the German Republic was founded in the spirit of the Enlightenment; the constitutional assembly met in Weimar, where Goethe and Schiller had once infused the city with their aesthetic ideals.

The composer and conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen, perhaps the most consistently imaginative force in modern classical music, likes to put together festivals that isolate a pivotal moment and space in musical history. In the past, he has organized series dedicated to Paris and Vienna, respectively, at the turn of the twentieth century. In early February, he returned to the Los Angeles Philharmonic, which he led from 1992 to 2009, to present a festival titled "The Weimar Republic: Germany 1918-1933." Salonen has presented this concept before, in London, and he will reprise it next season at the San Francisco Symphony, where he is about to take over as music director. Adding breadth to the L.A. event was a surrounding program of exhibitions, installations, auxiliary events, and film showings, all under the direction of the art curators Stephanie Barron and Nana Bahlmann. More American orchestras should pursue this kind of cross-disciplinary engagement, which pulls abstract musical ideas back into the flow of history.

Although the L.A. Weimar series included an obligatory cabaret night, it took a broader view of the era's multifarious stylistic trends. Yes, we had a generous helping of Kurt Weill, who created the bitterly hummable soundtrack for what Germans call the Golden Twenties. But Salonen gave equal weight to Paul Hindemith, who set the pace for musical invention in the Weimar period. Hindemith, especially in his early years, was brash, caustic, even Dadaistic. He also revered tradition and, especially in his later years, adhered to a more orderly, humanist philosophy. He left Nazi Germany in 1938, but not before contemplating the possibility of an official position, and settled eventually in the United States. The mixture of radical and conservative strains in Hindemith's temperament gives a faithful picture of the Weimar Republic as it really was—a modern state struggling to overcome an upwelling of chaos and rage. Needless to say, the spectacle is disturbingly familiar.

The festival began with the giddy uproar of Hindemith's "Rag Time (Well-Tempered)," a Jazz Age prank on the sainted Bach. Hindemith wrote it in 1921, at a time when he was augmenting his ensembles with alarm sirens, asking sopranos to scream at the top of their lungs, and telling instrumentalists that "beauty of sound is beside the point." The main theme of "Rag Time" is derived from the C-Minor Fugue of Bach's "Well-Tempered Clavier," Book I. In a program note for "Rag Time," Hindemith proposes that "if Bach were alive today he might well have invented the shimmy, or at least absorbed it into respectable music." In keeping with the condescension of that remark, the score more resembles rowdy marching-band music

ILLUSTRATION BY ELENI KALORKOTI

than anything in the African-American tradition. Salonen and the L.A. Phil wallowed in the welter of sound while keeping the humor intact, so that the work seemed primarily to be a joke on itself.

Weill, by contrast, was first encountered in a sober-minded mode—that of the severe young composer who had studied with Ferruccio Busoni and idolized Arnold Schoenberg. Weill's Concerto for Violin and Wind Orchestra, composed in 1924, is an exercise in reticence and ambiguity, shorn of Romantic excess and virtuoso display. Anticipating works that Shostakovich would write years later, it alternates between meandering, brooding episodes and outbreaks of bristling energy; at one point, the ensemble is reduced to a grotesque trio of xylophone and two double-basses. The challenge in such a score is to establish direction where conventional narrative patterns are absent. Carolin Widmann, the soloist, found her own tensely expressive thread in the labyrinth. Salonen elicited eerily beautiful sonorities from Weill's strange orchestration—for example, a slow-motion, proto-minimalist shimmer of winds in the third movement.

Hindemith's "Mathis der Maler" Symphony (1934), which followed after intermission, is derived from his opera of the same title—a portrait of the German Renaissance painter Matthias Grünewald and his quest to root himself in the "primal soil" of the people. Such a patriotic subject ought to have found favor in Nazi Germany, but Hitler had taken a dislike to the composer's music, and performances of "Mathis" were not permitted. In opera and symphony alike, the brattiness of the enfant terrible gives way to clean-lined monumentality, with plangent choirs of brass reminiscent of the symphonic climaxes of Anton Bruckner.

In some respects, "Mathis" is a curious choice for a Weimar festival, since the piece stems from the early Nazi period. But it partakes of the same urbane religiosity that marks certain creations of the Bauhaus movement: Lyonel Feininger's woodcut "Cathedral" appeared on the cover of Walter Gropius's manifesto of 1919. Salonen, in his interpretation, deëmphasized the symphony's Germanic context and gave it a modern sheen. The L.A. Phil offered up a sound that seemed to glow from within, drawing power from the deep roots of Western tradition rather than from the political distortions to which that tradition has been subjected.

Salonen's second program jumped into the anarchy of Weimar music theatre. The British actor-director Simon McBurney and his brother, the composer-scholar Gerard McBurney, devised a program, entitled "Nightfall," with a brink-of-disaster theme. First came Hindemith's youthful, brutalist one-act opera "Murderer, Hope of Women" (1919), which is based on a gruesome Expressionistic text by Oskar Kokoschka. The score begins with horns and trombones blaring a semitone dissonance, like a motor horn in a nightmare city, and goes on from there. That garish spectacle faded before the austere nobility of Weill's "Berliner Requiem" (1928), a choral cantata on poems by Bertolt Brecht. The memorialized figures include the murdered Communist leader Rosa Luxemburg, an unknown soldier of the First World War, and a young woman who has died by suicide. Lastly came the short ballet-opera "The Seven Deadly Sins," which Weill and Brecht created in the first part of 1933, soon after becoming exiles. The text is a fantastical American travelogue, with scenes set in Memphis, Los Angeles, and Boston; Weill's songwriting is sinuous and sardonic in the "Threepenny" manner.

The agile players of the L.A. Phil handled the rapid changes of style with ease, as did an accomplished group of singers, including Nora Fischer, Madeleine Bradbury Rance, Christopher Purves, and members of the L.A. Master Chorale. The disappointment was the McBurneys' production, which seldom rose above standard-issue Weimar iconography. Brecht insisted that historical settings should be used to comment on the present day, and he would have expected any revival of these pieces to illuminate the darker currents of American and European politics, none of which would have surprised him. Instead, we saw vintage film, photographs, and costumes, including an old-fashioned Hollywood movie shoot. The only real burst of political energy came during the intermission of the first concert, when members of the activist group Refuse Fascism unfurled an anti-Trump banner in seats behind the orchestra. The gesture received a round of applause from the audience, but it would have been good to see the same fury onstage. ♦

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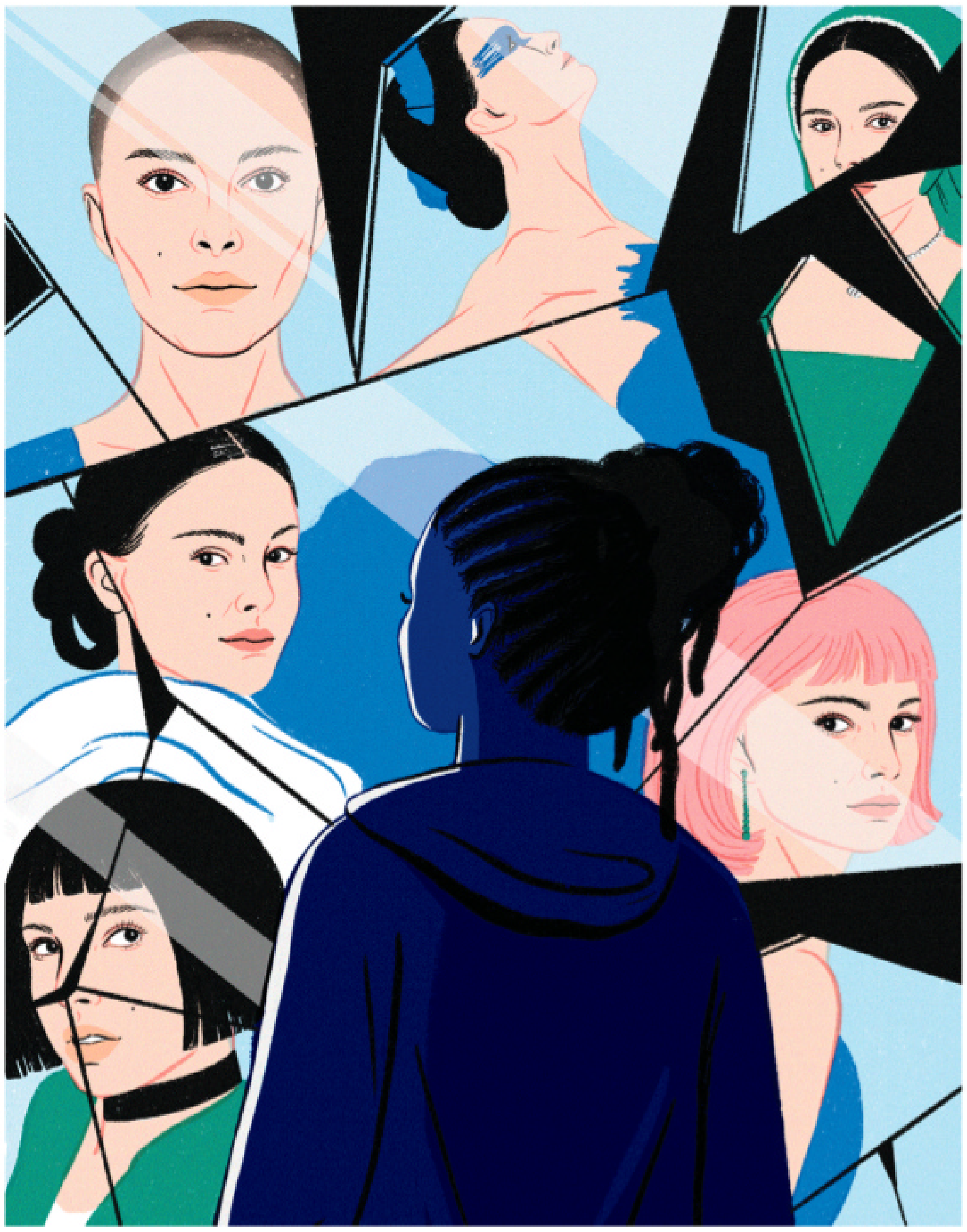
THE THEATRE

# DREAM ON

*"All the Natalie Portmans" explores the limits of Hollywood fantasy.*

BY VINSON CUNNINGHAM



Maybe you've seen the slightly unhinged Dior campaign starring Natalie Portman. Whether that great brand is using the ads to sell dresses or perfumes, high heels or sunglasses, or just waving its hand around and reminding us of its lasting existence, I couldn't tell you; the product, as far as I can see, is Portman herself, and the bouquet of associations she carries to the consumer's front door—and, as it happens, to an uneven but intriguing new play called "All the Natalie Portmans."

But here, first, is a TV commercial, which is itself a kind of abstract play: Portman, as Miss Dior, flits from one glossy frame to the next, all action, like James Bond on a vaguely fun spring-break vacation: she jumps off a pier (who knows where?) into what looks like a dubiously unperturbed and unpolluted lake; does elegant doughnuts in a pink sports car, spelling out in the sand the word "love" in loopy script; embraces some anonymous hunk with enough passion for the last night on earth before some gentle apocalypse. Portman is everywhere, and everybody, and having a ball. At the end of the commercial, she walks toward the camera, which settles on her face, in closeup: the face that launched a thousand fragrant magazine pages—balmed-up lips, efficient nose, chiselled cheeks, honeyed eyes. "What would you do for love?" she asks, suggestively, but she looks less like a lover than like someone so intoxicatingly free—of difficulty, of context—that, like most totems of prosperity, she galvanizes and alienates us in almost equal measure.

*A teen-ager soothes her pain with visions of Portmanesque prosperity.*

I thought of the ad, with its utter placelessness and its wordless hints of easy wealth, as I watched "All the Natalie Portmans," written by C. A. Johnson and directed by Kate Whoriskey, at the Robert W. Wilson MCC Theatre Space. You want to know what you'd do for love? Try this: Keyonna (Kara Young) is a black sixteen-year-old growing up in northeast Washington, D.C., living under the weight of crushing problems within her family. She's the anti-Miss Dior: her father's dead, her mother's an addict, and she and her older brother, Samuel (Joshua Boone), are on the verge of being tossed out of their apartment, and far too acquainted with day-to-day hunger. Keyonna's circumstances are all too specific; context clings to her like a shadow.

Still, love abounds where freedom doesn't: Keyonna and Samuel look out for each other, even as they settle into a strange love triangle. Samuel is enamored of—and engaged in a strained "friends with benefits" relationship with—Chantel (Renika Williams), whom Keyonna, unbeknownst to Samuel, has recently kissed. Keyonna is out; Chantel isn't. Romance is almost as painful for Keyonna as her relationship with her mother, who disappears whenever she wants to, and shows up without the money the family needs for rent.

Keyonna dreams of being a screenwriter, and tends monastically to a collage on the living-room wall: the faces of the actresses, mostly white, who populate the movies that she loves. She soothes herself with stories, while her mother and brother tease her for her taste. Why doesn't she watch something a little . . . blacker? Whoopi Goldberg is the sole black face on the wall, a little visual joke that had me laughing as soon as I noticed it. The collage is dominated by pictures of Portman, who, before long, starts showing up in the flesh (played by Elise Kibler),

ILLUSTRATION BY NHUNG LÊ

dressed up as her characters from flicks like “Black Swan” and “Garden State” and “The Professional.” At Keyonna’s lowest moments, here comes Portman: perfectly timed, beguilingly free, ready to create a distraction that feels like Keyonna’s desperate grasp at survival.

The Portman interludes, and the accompanying visual and aural trappings—a hilarious invocation of the “Garden State” soundtrack; the instantly recognizable costumes, especially the death-black, ominously avian tutu from “Black Swan”—are, initially, funny and humanizing, and point to how popular art and its personae simultaneously distract us and serve as background to our pain. The result, in “Portmans,” is a kind of social surrealism, in which feeling draws as much on the imagination as it does on rough, objective, material fact.

In a better calibrated script, one that took as much care with each of its characters as Johnson does with Keyonna, the flights into comic, gonzo Portmanism would help assuage the creeping sense we get that the details of the family’s life fit neatly into a clichéd black melodrama. We’ve seen something like this before: Daddy dead; Momma’s brains and morals fried by alcohol; brother eventually incarcerated (by whose fault we soon find out); poor baby sitting at home all alone, too stressed for schoolwork.

This chafes, not because such things never happen in real life but because their depiction in stories like this always sticks to appearances, to the troubles obvious in the skin, but never makes it further, never glances the heart. As it stands, we get the wonderfully complex Keyonna—bolstered by a rich, deep, moving performance by Young—who walks through a world of tropes like a Technicolor figure in a black-and-white talkie.

Much of the play’s charm, despite its narrative fuzziness, lies in the way Johnson portrays the creative precision and generous adornments of black speech. She rushes pleasingly toward the specific: D.C. slang, instantly familiar if you’ve ever lived there or visited for long, is lathered on. The volleys of loving encouragement, sly ribbing, and, often, recriminating eruption between Keyonna and Samuel are some of the best moments of the play.

That kind of articulation, rooted in place and politics and fired by a real but endangered affection, might also have been used to address the theme that Portman’s odd, hovering presence tries to point to; namely, that, at the bottom of the American class and racial structure, a straight white woman having fun, free to change costumes whenever the going gets rough, might appear to be as much a cruel apparition as a friendly partner. When “Natalie” kisses Keyonna, during the lowest of her many brutal lows, it serves only to further devastate her. Freedom hurts most when you can taste but never fully partake in it.

This is tough territory, how race mingles with desire and leaves behind a sour alloy. It’s reminiscent of Pecola Breedlove’s doomed yearnings in Toni Morrison’s “The Bluest Eye,” which leans into the story’s flights of fancy and brings them under the lights, rather than relegating them to a sideshow. I wanted more of Keyonna’s imaginings: everybody’s heard about troubles like hers, but nobody’s seen what ravages they might wreak in a mind so sensitive and determined and tortured by distant hope. Young’s lovely performance is at its best not when she’s blissed out by escapism, or broken down by her mother’s antics, but when she’s tiptoeing unsteadily on the line between these modes. That’s humanity: a dream walking through a swamp; local syntax dancing among the casual cruelties of official speech; thoughts of Heaven stuck in the mud.

The real Natalie Portman showed up at the Oscars earlier this year wearing, over her dress, a black cape whose piping was decorated with the names of all the female directors whom the Academy had failed to acknowledge with nominations: Greta Gerwig, Lorene Scafaria, Marielle Heller, Mati Diop, on and on. You might imagine a young girl like Keyonna, obsessed with film and dazzled by the red carpet and its camera flashes, seeing Portman onscreen and murmuring, “Good point,” then, looking around at the chaos of her own life, adding, “But if you only knew how much worse things could be.” ♦

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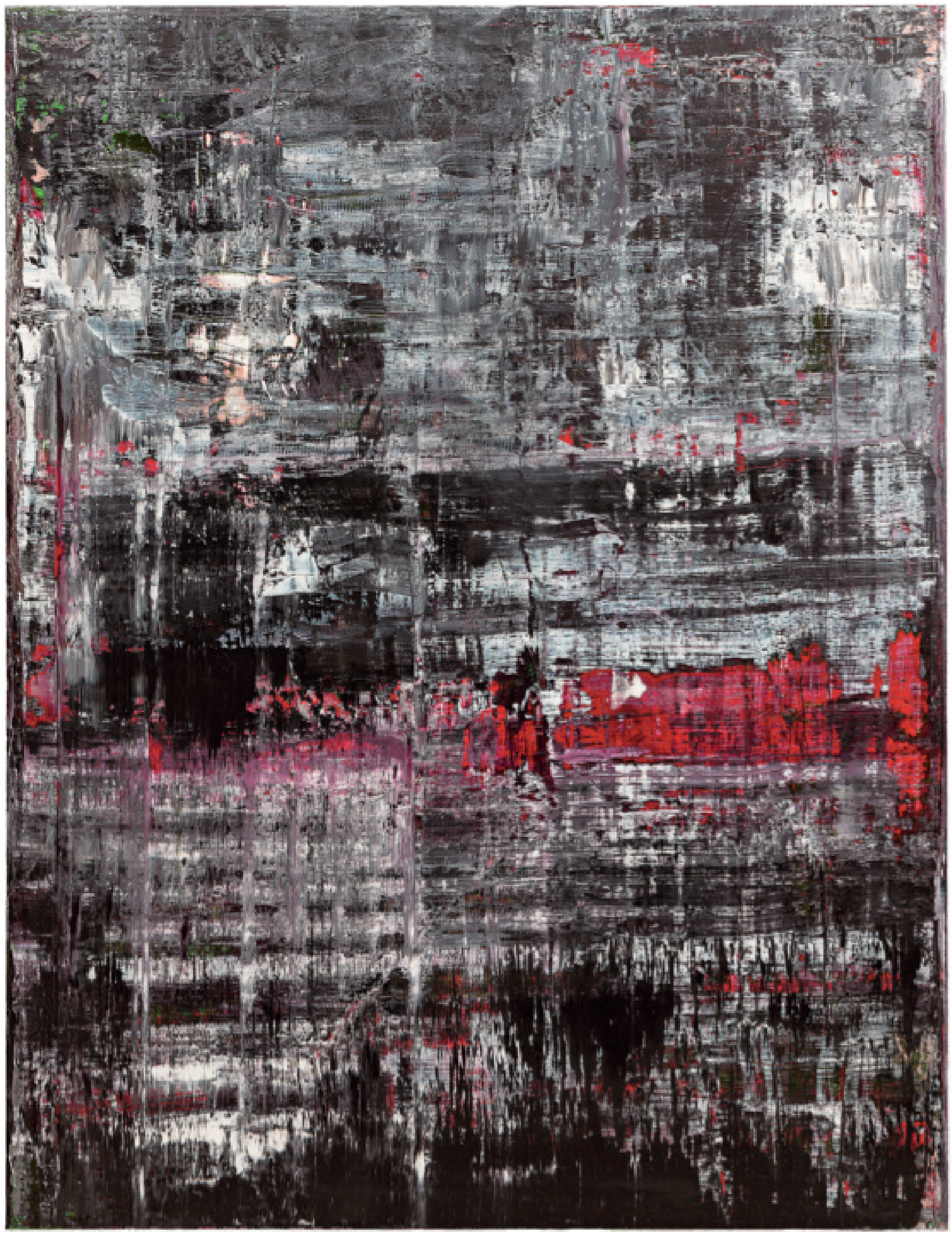
THE ART WORLD

# PAINTING HISTORY

*The dense layers of Gerhard Richter’s work.*

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL



*Richter’s series “Birkenau,” from 2014, exposes a thread of sorrow and guilt.*

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“Birkenau.” The dread name—of the main death facilities at Auschwitz—entitles four large abstract paintings and four full-sized digital reproductions of them in the last gallery of “Painting After All,” a peculiarly solemn Gerhard Richter retrospective at the Met Breuer. The works are based on four clandestine photographs that were smuggled out of the concentration camp in 1944. Two, taken from the shadowed exit of a gas chamber, show naked corpses strewn on the ground and smoke rising from bodies afire in a trench beyond them. Men in uniform stand at ease—two appear to chat—amid the shambles. Richter first saw the images in the fifties. He encountered them again in 2008 and kept the worst of them hanging in his studio in Cologne. In 2014, he projected them onto canvas and traced them. As he worked, they became illegible. The finished paintings exemplify Richter’s frequent style of densely layered, dragged pigments. They are unusually harsh in aspect, with clashing red and green, sickly whites, and grim blacks. But you’d hardly guess, by looking, their awful inspiration.

Richter’s “Birkenau” is a provocation—who dares take history’s ultimate obscenity as a theme, or even an allusion, for art?—but one that makes biographical sense. Born in Dresden in 1932, Richter is haunted, like many of his German contemporaries, by memories and associations from the Third Reich and the Second World War. Previously indirect in his references to the horror, he has reason to focus on it now, for a show that comes late in his life, and which he says might be the last one of his six-decade career as a chameleon stylist and visual philosopher of painting. (He’s eighty-eight and, not well enough to travel, did not attend the opening.) The shock of “Birkenau” retroactively exposes a thread of sorrow and guilt through an art of invariably subtle, at times teasing, ambiguities. His photographic images transposed to canvas and painterly techniques that exploit chance have often seemed deliberately arbitrary, as if to forswear feeling. He brings to everything an attitude of radical skepticism. But it has dawned on many of us, over the years, that plenty of emotion, like banked fire, underlies his restless ways.

Heretofore, Richter’s only overt reference to the Holocaust was a suite of touching illustrations for an edition of “The Diary of Anne Frank,” picturing Frank’s face in a range of styles, which he made in 1957, while he was unhappily apprenticed as a Socialist Realist painter in East Germany. (The illustrations are not in the show.) Having glimpsed free-world art when he was permitted visits to exhibitions in the West, he fled via East Berlin in 1961, shortly before the Wall went up. He was soon in Düsseldorf, in the thick of an avant-garde that was both piqued and excited by Pop art and the traditions of Dada. “Capitalist Realism,” he and some new friends, including the brilliant Sigmar Polke, termed their response, which, among other things, degraded the glossiness of advertising material to matte grunge. Richter took to painting copies of banal black-and-white photographs, smearing the paint to emphasize the change of medium. Among a number of these in the show are paintings from family snapshots that touch on Richter’s and Germany’s dire past.

One, “Uncle Rudi” (1965), is of a relative—in uniform and smiling goofily—who died fighting in the war. Another, “Aunt Marianne” (painted in 1965 and rendered as a luminous digital print in 2018), shows a woman cradling baby Gerhard in her arms; she was adjudged schizophrenic, imprisoned, and then killed in a Nazi eugenics program. Keeping company with those poignancies is

"Mr. Heyde" (1965), taken from a news photograph of the concentration-camp psychiatrist Werner Heyde being arrested, in 1959, after fourteen years of maintaining a false identity. (He hanged himself in prison in 1964.) Richter wouldn't have expected viewers to recognize those subjects readily, and he was at no pains to explain them. Their meaning stayed personal, with roots in his boyhood, when he was enlisted in the junior auxiliary of the Hitler Youth and his father served in the Wehrmacht. Not until "Birkenau" would he palpate the wound again.

It feels heavy-handed of me (though on this occasion Richter quite asks for it) to be zeroing in on some specific content of his art, which always shades subjects with undecidable intention. That goes for early images of tabloid sensations, such as yearbook-style portraits of eight nurses who were murdered on a single night in Chicago, in 1966, and forty-eight deadpan copies of photographs of famous artists and intellectuals. The latter served, perhaps, as marmoreal father figures for a largely fatherless generation. (It's estimated that more than four million German men died in the war.) Uncertainty clings, as well, to later works, including jittery cityscapes that may be bombed ruins or simply indistinct views of an intact metropolis; landscapes that could be either sarcastic or sincere revisitations to German Romanticism (I vote for wistful); funereal paintings of candles and skulls; and ravishing photo-realist pictures, true to the hues of color film, of subjects including members of his family. One of these last, from 1988, portraying his daughter Betty from behind, seems to me the single most beautiful painting made by anyone in the last half century. It is not in the present show. Nor is "October 18, 1977," Richter's famous series drawn from photographs of the Baader-Meinhof terrorist gang, in life and, as suicides in prison, death. Those darkling images will always tug at our general assessments of Richter. Whatever his reason for taking on a subject that was charged, at the time, with conflicting political passions, I believe that the work asserts an artist's license to transcend partisan judgment, independent of opinions that may even include his own.

Irony blankets Richter's career. He is a darling of the contemporary art market, with his works selling at auction for tens of millions of dollars. But his longtime best friend, and a co-curator of this show, is the critic Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, a hard-bitten apostle of Frankfurt School anti-capitalist, all but anti-aesthetic, political theory. In a notorious interview, in 1986, Buchloh insisted on interpreting Richter's art as historical critique skewering the bourgeois decadence of painting, and Richter placidly declared his wholehearted allegiance to Western painting's grand tradition. Richter said, "The reason I don't argue in 'socio-political terms' is that I want to produce a picture and not an ideology." He declines to claim any subversive intent, even for his occasional work in odd formats, such as stark charts of random colors and the use of transparent glass in place of canvas—two predilections that came together in his successful commission, in 2007, of an immense stained-glass window for Cologne Cathedral, proving that the experiments had been exploratory rather than tendentious. I like to imagine Buchloh as a negative conscience perched on Richter's shoulder, amusingly scandalized as the artist hews again and yet again to ancient values of meaningfulness and pleasure.

While never forsaking representation—as seen at the Met Breuer in portraits of his third wife, Sabine Moritz, and their three children, which radiate Titianesque color—Richter took up chromatic abstraction in the seventies, overlaying brushed, slathered, and scraped swaths of paint. I remember hating those on my first sight of them, circa 1980. They seemed to me sloppy travesties of Abstract Expressionism, and pointless: inferior coals to the Newcastle of Willem de Kooning. Gradually, I caught their drift as pragmatic explorations of painterly phenomena: ur-paintings. Not only condoning but soliciting accident, Richter attends to the multifarious effects of layered paint that has been repeatedly smashed and dragged, wet-in-wet. He appraises the results with an exercise of taste, deciding what to keep and what to efface. In this, his true predecessor is Jackson Pollock, who, dripping paint, collaborated with chance and monitored the results.

At last I saw, as I still see, Richter's abstractions as miraculously, often staggeringly, beautiful, with an air of having come into being through a will of their own, happening to—rather than issuing from—their creator. They provide the chief pleasures of the show, which excludes the more brazen of his subjects—there are none of his early borrowings from pornography, for example—and the most seductive of his color-photograph transformations, including floral still-lifes. The selection favors eerie minor keys, as seems appropriate for being a retrospective bathed in the terrible resonance of "Birkenau." ♦

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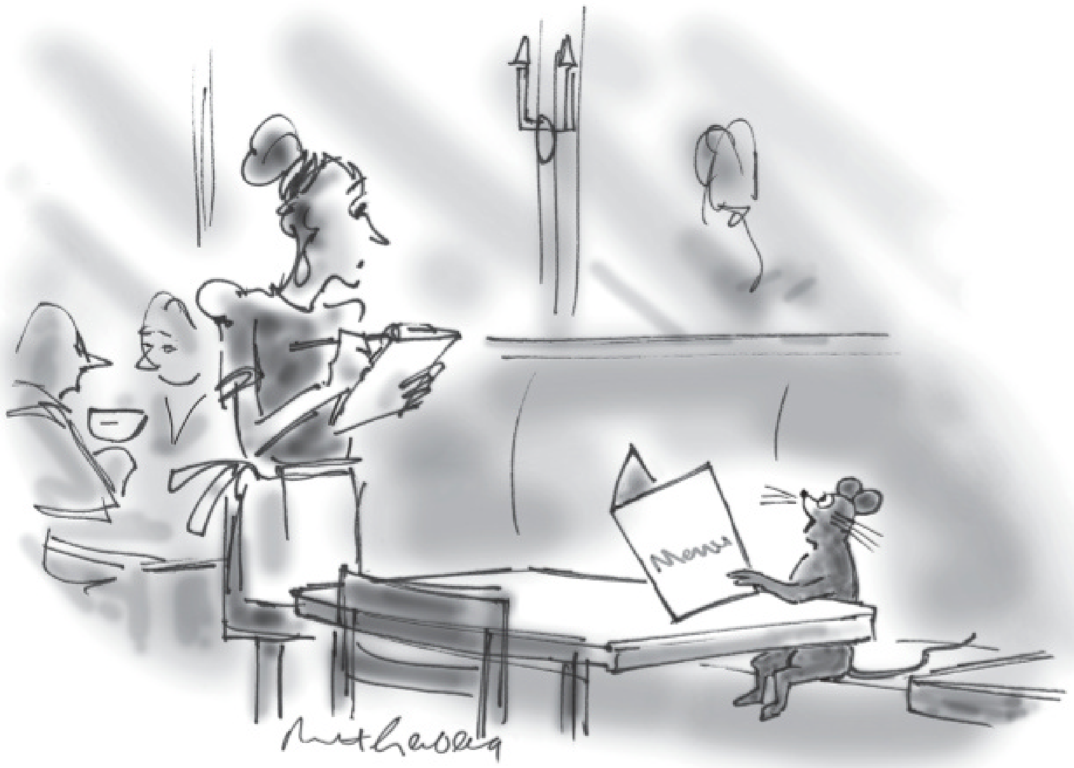
## CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

*Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Mort Gerberg, must be received by Sunday, March 15th. The finalists in the March 2nd contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the March 30th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.*

## THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



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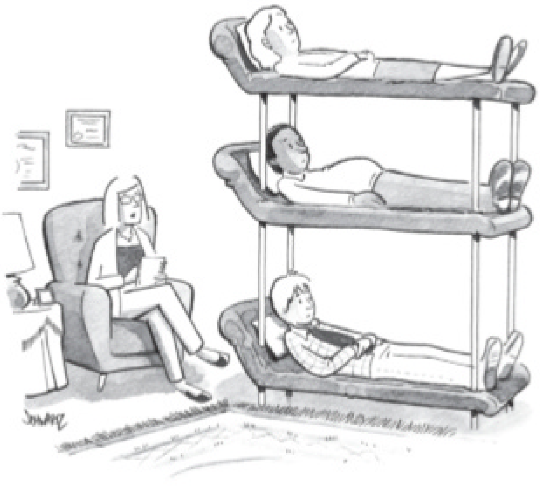
## THE FINALISTS

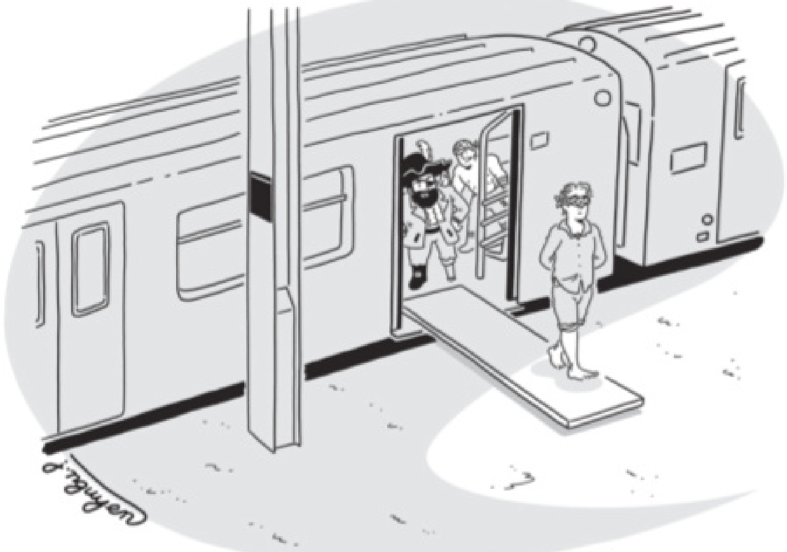


*“And how do you feel about how she feels about how he feels?”*
Liliya Jones, Los Angeles, Calif.

*“Trust me. You're not alone.”*
Clarke Owens, Loudonville, Ohio

*“Today, we're going to work on your codependence issues, your separation anxiety, and your fear of heights.”*
Johnny Bell, Santa Fe, N.M.

## THE WINNING CAPTION



*“No one crosses the Pirates of Penn Station.”*
Paul Nesja, Mount Horeb, Wis.

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